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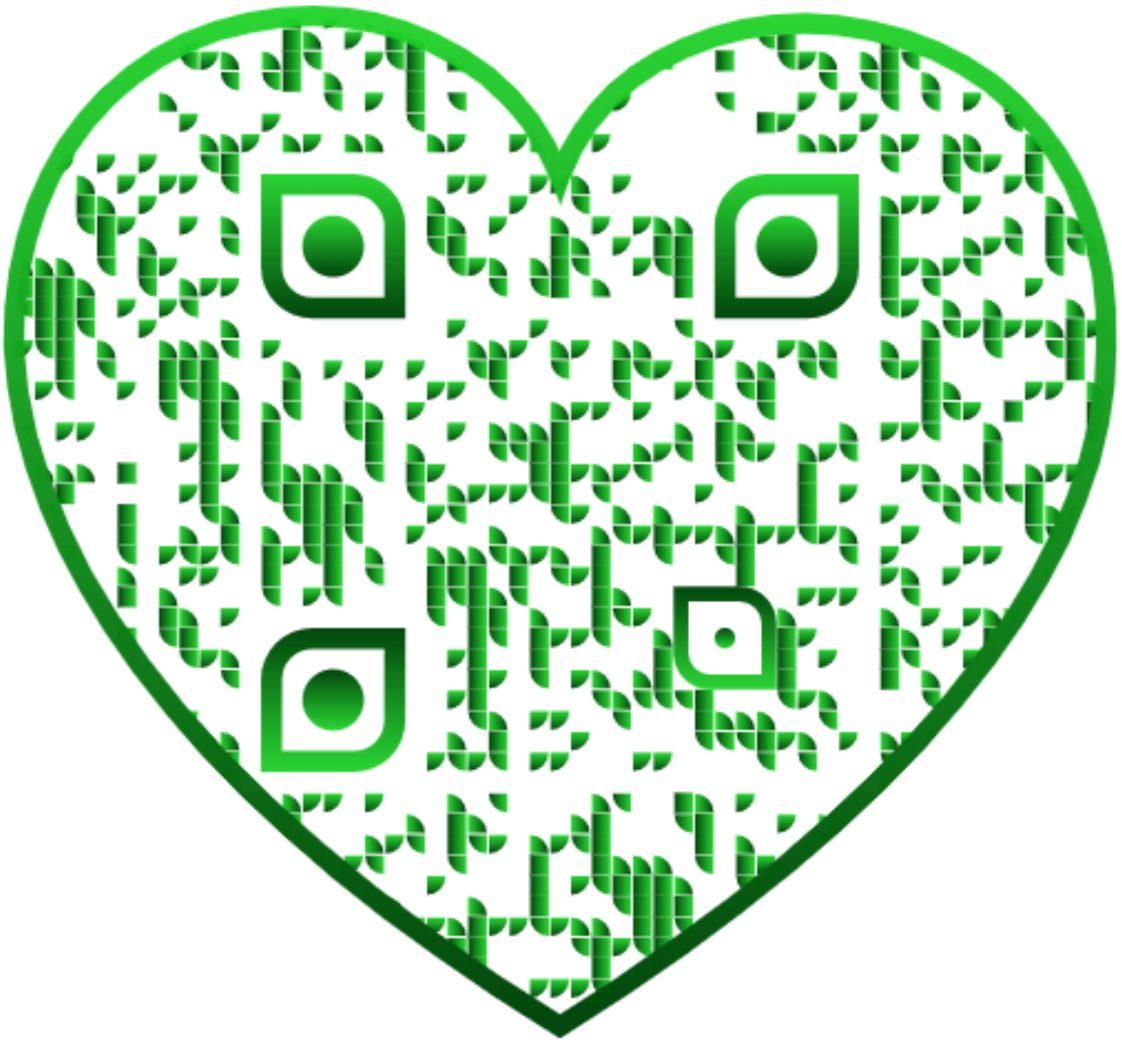
INDIA

DUA LIPA

IS GIVING US EVERYTHING



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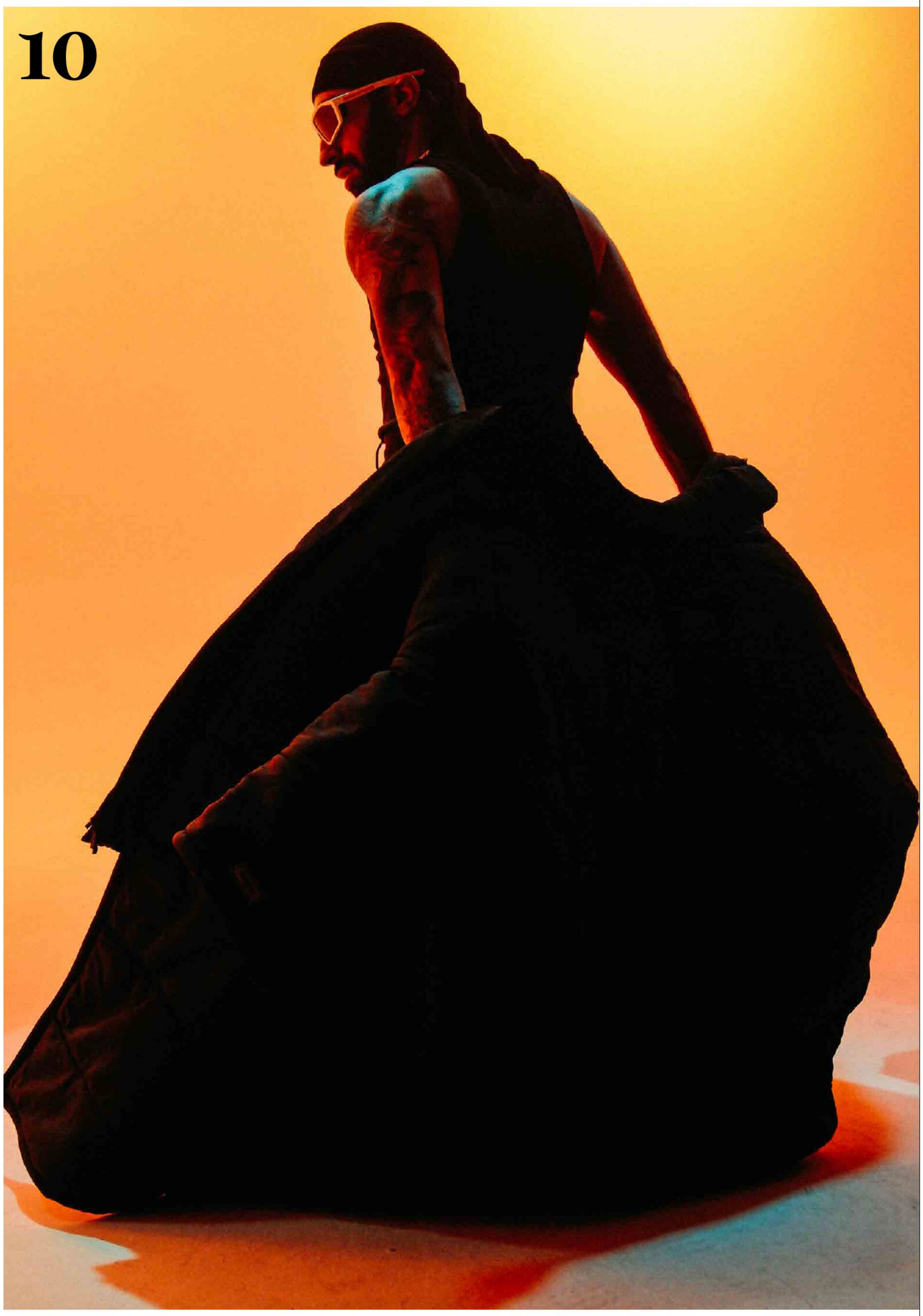

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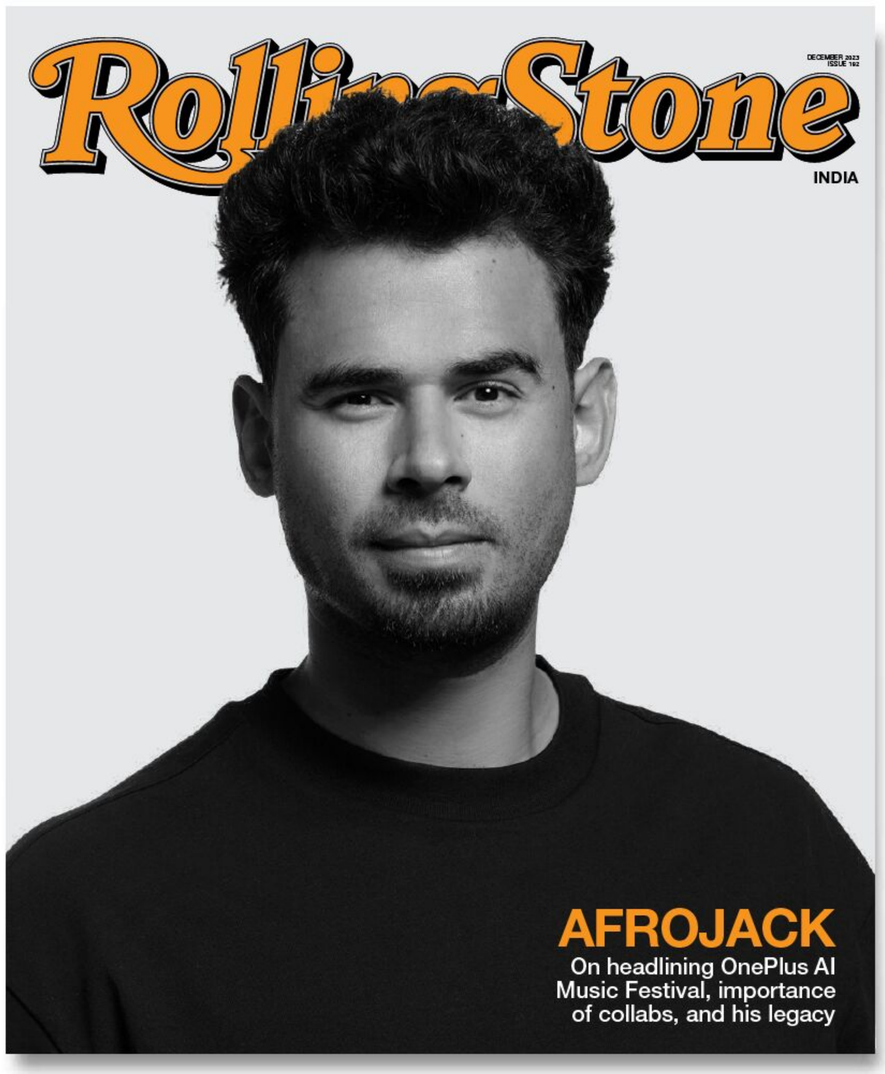
+ LOVE LETTERS & ADVICE



"Kudos to Afrojack for creating a sonic tapestry that resonates worldwide.""

— Colin Rodrigues

Afrojack's Musical Tapestry

The article on Afrojack beautifully weaves the narrative of his musical journey, connecting dots that unveil the artist's versatility and global impact. It's a testament to the power of music in transcending boundaries. Kudos to Afrojack for creating a sonic tapestry that resonates worldwide.

SPOTLIGHT

Musical Mastery of Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy

It was fantastic reading about Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy and their remarkable musical journey. In a lifetime, they've crafted a timeless legacy, a true testament to their talent and dedication.

- **Shilpa Desai**

Meiyang Chang's Artistic Evolution

Meiyang Chang's interview sheds light on his multifaceted artistic journey, from 'Indian Idol' to acting and his latest song. His authenticity and versatility continue to captivate audiences. Chang's evolution reflects a dynamic fusion of talent and passion, shaping a compelling narrative in the entertainment industry.

- **Rajesh Tewari**

Sandunes' Enchanting Sonic Expedition

Sandunes' new album, 'The Ground Beneath Her Feet,' is a mesmerizing journey through sonic landscapes. The immersive blend of sounds showcases her artistic depth and innovation. Sandunes continues to push boundaries, delivering a musical experience that resonates profoundly.

- **Santosh Sriram**

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RollingStoneIndia RollingStoneIn

A Night Full of Musical Connection in Brooklyn

ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE in Brooklyn was full of good vibes and a spirit of musical collaboration on Nov. 10, as two pairs of unique talents — Lil Yachty and Tierra Whack, and Jon Batiste and Gucci Mane — took the stage for *Rolling Stone*'s first-ever Musicians on Musicians live event. First up were Yachty and Tierra, who showed off their bond as close friends and collaborators. They talked about their influences (Yachty chose Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon,* while Tierra shouted out Busta Rhymes' "Gimme Some More"), shared new music, and made some headlines when Yachty criticized the "terrible" state of hip-hop today. Next, Batiste and Gucci revealed their creative secrets and connected over their experiences growing up in the South. "The biggest blessing of recognition is when your peers respect what you do," said Batiste, who started that morning by being nominated for six Grammy Awards. Later, he took a seat at the grand piano onstage and played a six-minute solo version of Gucci's 2009 classic "Lemonade." All night, the artists fed off one another's energy. "I feel like since we've been talking, I got beaucoup ideas already," Batiste said.

Lil Yachty, Tierra Whack, Jon Batiste, and Gucci Mane (from left) backstage in Brooklyn

VERSACE

Kahani and Kunal Merchant Explain the Indo Warehouse Experience on Debut India Tour

The DJ-producer duo behind the platform and label took over reopening night at Rockpool at W Goa this month

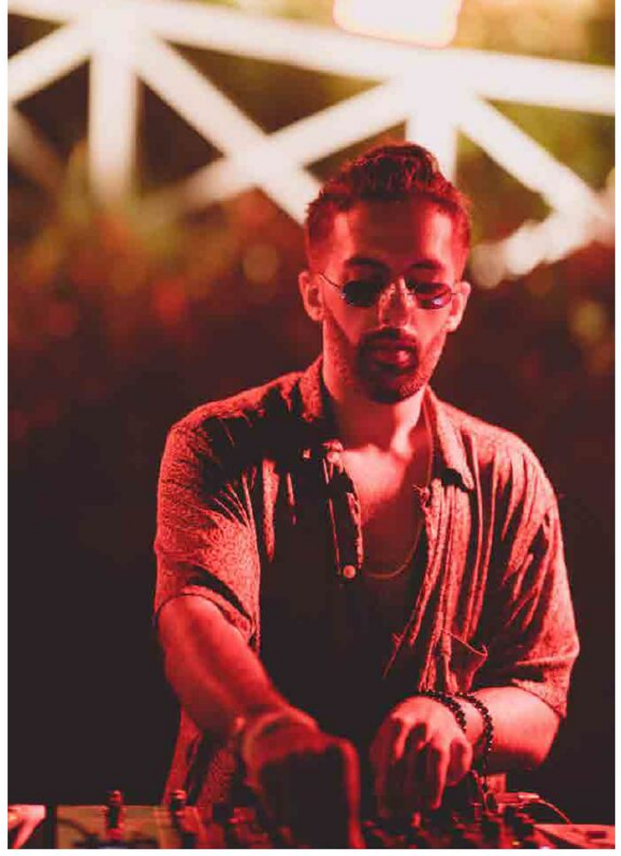
The party don't stop when you're in Goa, much after the new year crowd slinks back to their offices. It's still tourism season and the newly reopened Rockpool at W Goa is more than happy to capitalize on it. The sprawling space by Vagator Beach recently hosted New York's Indo Warehouse, the platform and label founded by DJ-producers Kahani aka Armaan Gupta and Kunal Merchant on January 5th.

With over a thousand in attendance, Indo Warehouse also included sets by selectors such as Ethyr and AREUBLUE, who have been part of the movement in the U.S. and Europe. The reopening of Rockpool at W Goa coupled with Indo Warehouse's debut India tour showed some programming might at a time when other venue spaces like antiSOCIAL are also cropping up in the state to make the most of party central.

Over a Rockpool, though, with lights along the railing that led down to the main dancefloor and disco balls strung up, it felt like an uncomplicated night with tables also set up for a chill vibe. Indo Warehouse were chill, for sure, but that was only part of the journey. The artists steadily built the tempo up, winning audiences over with tracks that sampled A.R. Rahman's Bollywood hits, "Yeh Mera Dil Yaar Ka Diwana" sung by Asha Bhosle, Abida Parveen and R.D. Burman's "Mehbooba Mehbooba" in a seemingly spectral way that hit when you least expect them.

Kahani worked in everything from "Chaiyya Chaiyya" to "Kehna Hi Kya" and Merchant threw in bits of "Yeh Ladka Hai Allah" and "Urvasi Urvasi," which really prompted the question – what makes this different from Bollywood night with just really good DJs? It might be an oversimplification to compare, but in one way, the nostalgia that's crafted a deeper understanding of electronic music with Indo Warehouse.

It's one thing to play up Indian movie song samples in your tracks to a diaspora audience in another country, and a different matter to bring that to an Indian audience. Gupta says he was never really worried about how they would be received in India. "I think once upon a time, those thoughts crossed



our mind. Now, that never crosses our mind, because I think what we do is actually authentic to us. So there's zero pandering." Rightfully so, everyone at Rockpool at W Goa was very much in the groove of things, cheering on Indo Warehouse throughout.

With eight cities remaining in their India tour – including Dome, NSCI SVP Stadium in Mumbai on January 25th – the duo spoke with *Rolling Stone India* from a villa at W Goa about how they recharged after their first date at Sunburn Festival in late December and spent their evenings on a temp studio setup at the hotel, making new tracks. Some of which will get previewed on tour itself, as Gupta and Merchant promise plenty of surprises in the coming two weeks. Merchant says, "We're gonna have some secret surprises that pop up in different shows, that's gonna be fun."

Overall, the goal is to bring the experience from "the moment you step onto the property until you depart" the gig, according to Gupta. He adds about the questions that drive their sets, "What do we want to bring back from the old crates that really makes everybody smile and sing and give our own twist to it? And then even with the originals, how do we make people dance and move in a way that they haven't felt before?"

"The thing that we hear from people is that this sound has never existed. And what I mean by that is the elements of our culture that we're bringing into the electronic music spectrum, the way we're doing, it hasn't existed, but it has existed for other cultures, in Latin culture and African culture," says Merchant.

Merchant adds, "The thing that we hear from people is that this sound has never existed. And what I mean by that is the elements of our culture that we're bringing into the electronic music spectrum, the way we're doing, it hasn't existed, but it has existed for other cultures, in Latin culture and African culture."

Founded in 2021, Merchant met Gupta at a party and the two got talking about what they could work on together, in terms of growing with each other and their platform. Merchant says about their relationship, "My competition is when I hear him and I'm like, 'Damn, how does he have this? What is this thing he's doing?' That's the game, we continue to push each other." Gupta adds, "There will constantly be moments where like, he's playing something, and I'm just looking at him like, holding his shoulder. 'What is this?!'"

Those kinds of moments, especially when evoked for their original mixes, are then pushed out through the label. Another one that's coming up is "Rang Rasiya" featuring vocalist Chitralekha Sen, which was tested back at an Indo Warehouse party in November 2023. Gupta says, "That track is specifically something that we want to send to artists around the world, and we want to hear in rooms in almost every country."

There are already plans to return to India within the span of a year for "round two" as Gupta calls it. There's a North America tour, Australia and Europe coming up as well. Merchant adds, "We're going to probably try to see it all. I don't think it will go to Antarctica this year. But we'll try to see most of this world and hopefully, people get a chance to really sample our sound." **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF W GOA

Prabh Deep on 'KING Returns' EP and Collaboration with John Jacobs

The EP marks the Punjabi rapper's first project since his year-long hiatus

In a move that is sure to create tidal waves in the hip hop community, Prabh Deep recently dropped his latest EP '*KING Returns*' with the music video for the track 'Ethe Rakh' in collaboration with John Jacobs eyewear. The EP marks the Punjabi rapper's first project since his year-long hiatus.

The project is equal parts symbolic and assertive, positioning Prabh Deep at the forefront of the industry with thematic visuals of legacy, longevity and self-identity. This 6-track EP harkens back to his 2019 project '*KING*', with the artist serving as producer, composer, lyricist and arranger.

In conversation with *Rolling Stone India*, the rapper shared the following thoughts on his newest EP:

How does *KING* Returns serve to write the new chapter of your discography?
Prabh Deep: *KING* Returns is part of a bigger picture, a small part of a big picture that I have been trying to create over the last six years and hopefully continue to create more. The aim is to complete this picture one day.

You recently shifted base to Goa. How do you balance paying homage to your Tilak Nagar roots, while also pushing your music to new, fresh directions?
Prabh Deep: I keep on going back to Tilak Nagar and meet the kids there who have become fans now. Also, just inspiring them, inspiring my cousins, inspiring people I grew up with to do more. That's how I pay back and keeping the balance while living in Goa and not forgetting where I come from.

Where do you find inspiration from lately? What are the places you went to that helped make this project come to life?
Prabh Deep: I find inspiration from within, for now. It's mostly me trying to upcycle some furniture or me trying to clean my room or just beautify my environment for a while. That's what inspires me now. I was on tour and also went to Ladakh, Kashmir and gathered some of the information that's in the album. Basically these are the experiences I had in the cities and around the people I have and travelled and cleared my thoughts. Wrote what I really wanted to write with a clear mind. But yes, Ladakh and Kashmir helped a lot.

The music video for Ethe Rakh invokes visuals of royalty, power and longevity. What do these ideas mean to you?
Prabh Deep: Royalty, power and longevity are what I live for. Yehi chahiye mujhe (this is what I want), this is my manifestation for the future. These are my thoughts.

How do you sustain self-confidence?
Prabh Deep: Hamesha nahi rehta hai (it doesn't always sustain) self-confidence. Kabhi kabhi self-doubt bhi ho jata hai aur I think aisa hi rehna chahiye (sometimes you end up doubting yourself and that's ok) because there's a lot of ego that comes into play. I use my ego sometimes when I'm feeling self-doubt so it's good to have that. Anyhow, I keep on shifting between using my ego and having self-confidence.

John Jacobs collaborating with Prabh Deep is a giant leap for artists using their platform to create

new paths in the world of fashion. Today, inclusivity is recognised and encouraged, and brands that embrace the needs of their diverse clientele are doing their part in keeping up with the times.

"The Turban Edit collection is legit." Prabh Deep says, reasoning that the innovative design reflects the same spirit of bold individuality that he celebrates in his music. According to the rapper, there was a need for sunglasses that were turban-friendly. In the music video for his song "Ethe Rakh," Deep wears sunglasses from the new collection and true to his personal style, they're clean, universally flattering and a breath of fresh air.

"This song is about being true to oneself and wearing your heart on your sleeve, no matter how many people try to throw you off. I hope it inspires people to find their strength and shine from within." On being asked about his experience with the esteemed eyewear brand, he says that their dedication to quality and their overlapping commitment to being bold and individualistic sets them apart.

Launched in 2015, John Jacobs focused on a customer base that values transparency, ease of lifestyle, and curation. They make it a point to engage in impactful collaborations that resonate with their customers. Like their Turban Edit, they strive to create eyewear that has cultural impact.

"The team focuses on developing frame design that considers different face shapes and skin tones, complementing the unique features of the wearer." Adds Apeksha Gupta, CEO and Creative Director of the brand. "Inclusivity is not just a design principle for us, it's a mindset that permeates every aspect of our brand, from product development to marketing campaigns." **AARYAMAN TRIVEDI AND NIMISHA ELIZABETH DEAN**

Festival Organizers BlueTree Want to Make Live Music In Delhi Great Again

With the capital's metal event Outrage Festival going open-air this year and Oddball Festival in two cities, Karan Mehta and Dhairya Sethi talk about mounting more live gigs

THE NEW YEAR starts off with big promises from New Delhi-based music company BlueTree, who are putting together Outrage Festival on January 13th (open-air at Nexus Select Citywalk in Saket) and Oddball Festival on February 24th and 25th in New Delhi and Bengaluru.

Between these two events, everyone from metal bands like Kryptos to Zygnema and Chaos are performing at Outrage Festival this week, followed by the return of Norwegian prog band Leprous, the India debut of Armenian jazz-rock pianist-composer Tigran Hamasyan and Polish guitar ace Jakub Zytecki, Avial and more at Oddball Festival's second edition, which has previously hosted virtuoso trio The Aristocrats, Bloodywood and Blackstratblues in 2023.

The company's Karan Mehta – also guitarist in prog metallers Colossal Figures – says that putting together bigger live events like rock/metal festivals in New Delhi has meant that the odds are always stacked against them. "But we must prevail and we will," he says. Mehta says particularly with Outrage Festival, it was something "that our newly formed community asked for."

Sethi adds, "We want the teenagers and young, 20-somethings of today to feel what we witnessed at Hamsadhwani Stadium through the 2000s." All of this comes with a similar set of risks that past and present promoters take on while putting together independent gigs. "We have to tread carefully we're funding this ourselves with shallow pockets, a successful edition doesn't necessarily translate to financial success either, there are so many variables attached to this, we're learning as we go," he adds.

"We want the teenagers and young, 20-somethings of today to feel what we witnessed at Hamsadhwani Stadium through the 2000s," says Sethi.

With a packed gig calendar of tours and music festivals to choose from (and budget their savings into for tickets), the Indian gig-goer's demands and expectations have always been tough to meet. Oddball Festival announcements – which will have at least one more international headliner that matches the event series' genre-hopping curatorial spirit – were greeted with some disappointment and questions of why a Mumbai stop isn't on the cards.

Mehta points to the "operational challenge" for a small team like theirs in mounting a three-city Oddball Festival edition like they'd done last year. Although they had entertainment company 4/4 from Mumbai to help them, he says it was too much to take on this time. Sethi adds that ticket sales were also affected in all cities due to a new entrant like Oddball vying for attention amongst bigger events like Lollapalooza India and Vh1 Supersonic in the same timeframe. Nevertheless, a Mumbai edition of Oddball Festival is scheduled take place in April.

Although a few other gigs from BlueTree have taken place, Mehta says it's been a "very hard year to host more" in the capital. "What we have been somewhat successful in is bringing more brands to support bands here and we look forward to building on the same. This should come in effect in the years to come," Mehta adds.

Another edition of Outrage Festival in August is expected, with more artist tours later in the year. Sethi says a multi-stage festival from BlueTree is on the cards, "our own version of Woodstock." Mehta adds, "We have also been working on building new IPs with brands, more on which will be revealed in the second quarter of 2024." **ANURAG TAGAT**

THE MONETA

Fatoumata Diawara Talks India Return, 'London Ko' Album and Damon Albarn

The Malian artist will perform at Lollapalooza India in Mumbai

Speaking from her home in France, Malian artist Fatoumata Diawara has a red and black scarf and stole combination worn around her, matching her hair. If you've seen photos of the star singer-composer and guitarist all the way from her 2011 breakout album *Fatou* to her 2023 album *London Ko*, you know that Diawara is always vibrant, in song, in person and clearly, in style as well.

Speaking to *Rolling Stone India* ahead of her appearance in India, the artist says Indians, like Africans, have "no fear of colors." She adds with a smile, "In Europe, people discuss a lot about colors. They are quite shy with the colors, but in India everything is colorful and I love that. I feel connected very fast." Of course, there's also the food ("I don't have a problem to eat there and that's amazing," she adds) and spirituality, but it's not the first time you'd hear that from any artist visiting India.

Diawara was last in the country in 2014, after the success of an album like *Fatou*. This time around, it's part of the second edition of Lollapalooza India taking place on January 27th and 28th in Mumbai. "It took too long to go back to India but now I'm excited. It's never late," she says. It also marks the first time she's performing at Lollapalooza anywhere in the world, following which Diawara will perform in Europe and North America through 2024. "Festivals are almost the same in some ways, good vibes, love of sharing new music, diversity... so I'm expecting something like that, since that's the aim of the festival," Diawara adds.

There will be songs from *London Ko* for the most part in her Lollapalooza India set, and Diawara calls the album a "new baby" that is her latest way of adapting Mali's traditional music into a blend of blues, rock, jazz and more. "I think the Indian audience will love it. We're going to rock together." She goes on to describe *London Ko* as a "bridge between global music and African music, trying to have a connection between both things." She adds, "It's more free, I'm re-exploring the entire deeper side of Malian music, but at the same time, [keeping] western music [influences]. It's like a meeting between two worlds. So good energies, good vibration."

"I will keep singing in Bambara because it's important for my ancestors to be represented."

From one perspective – the Malian side, that is – *London Ko* reiterates just why the world is drawn to the region's rhythms, styles and stories. Right from Vieux Farka Toure to Ballake Sissoko and Madou Sidiki Diabate to Songhoy Blues, Malian artists have often stopped by India for performances. Diawara believes the affinity has a lot to do with how Malian music even today is close to its traditional music. She adds, "Through our instruments, like the kora, n'goni balafon... like in India, you have the sitar that represents the country along with other instruments. We still have older instruments, but we adapt all of them to the modern sound." Plus, the vocals have often drawn from the blues, which Diawara believes is a universal kind of artform that can be adapted to any kind of music.

Diawara sings in Bambara, one of the native languages of Mali and says it also helps keep her close to her people wherever she takes her music. "I will keep singing in Bambara because it's important for my ancestors to be represented," she adds.

One of the strongest allies she's found along the way has been U.K. artist Damon Albarn, best known for his work in rock band Blur and later, with the animated group Gorillaz. Diawara has regularly worked with Albarn on her material, including *London Ko* and also sang on Gorillaz's song "Desole" in 2020. She affectionately calls Albarn her "soul brother." She adds, "Every time, he [Albarn] brings me something new. He will push me to someplace with the music where I cannot go on my own. He's like my teacher, because he talks about modern sounds that I cannot reach, which is not my tradition. Damon loves Malian music, he's one of the biggest fans. Together, we learn from each other." They're already working on a new project together, which takes them to South America, according to Diawara. "He respects me a lot and I do respect him and that is very important in our area as a woman and as a songwriter, composer," she adds.

With that project coming up, touring is still the main focus for Diawara in 2024, along with more videos and collaborative projects. She says, "I'm going to keep promoting the album because it deserves it and I'm still putting a full album out. [I'm] not like the new generation, who put out something every month. When I have an album, it's usually every five years or so and I take time to really travel, enjoy the stage, grow with the songs."

ANURAG TAGAT

ALUN BE

‘Hallyu Visa’ to Be Unveiled by South Korea for K-Culture Fans

Applicants for the two-year ‘Hallyu visa’ may enroll in Korean schools and agencies; those who are passionate about Korean culture, K-pop, and the like

A “WORKCATION VISA,” or a digital nomad visa, has been issued by South Korea as part of a trial run commencing on January 1, 2024. Within days, it came to pass that South Korea’s Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism would roll out a “Hallyu visa,” meant to draw in K-culture fandom across the globe.

A foreigner enrolled in a cultural academy in South Korea may remain there for a maximum of two years with the Hallyu visa, known officially as a “K-culture training visa,” states *NEWSTOWN*, a Korean media outlet.

In further detail, *The Asian Affairs* notes that it would afford candidates chances to gain firsthand knowledge from industry experts spanning the Korean music, drama, film, animation, and gaming industries. They will gain insight into the inner workings of the Korean entertainment scene and the process of content creation through this distinct extensive, hands-on training program.

Applicants for the two-year Hallyu visa are allegedly teenagers who may enroll in Korean schools and agencies; those who are passionate about Korean culture, K-pop, and the like. It makes sense that South Korea seeks to bring in more international talent by expanding access to its worldwide fan base for K-content, notably K-pop, and pushing its cultural content more, in line with the trend of foreigners joining K-pop bands and pursuing careers in the genre.

In one of its articles, *Korea JoongAng Daily* adds that while the E-6 visa authorizes foreigners to find employment in Korean entertainment, it can be difficult to get and requires candidates to sign trainee contracts with Korean entertainment firms. Things should be easier with the arrival of the Hallyu visa, for which applicants must register at Korean institutes approved by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. We should have more precise information about the Hallyu visa in the coming months.

The workcation visa, on the other hand, permits remote workers visiting Korea to stay an extra year. The hopeful must work for a foreign company and have earned at least 85,000,000 KRW in compensation in the year prior. For the length of the visa’s validity, those who qualify may also request authorization to keep their dependent family members in South Korea, per the *Korea Tourism Organization*.

At a time when the global fandom for Korean content is on a meteoric rise, these special visas are great vehicles for South Korea to further promote it, capitalizing on its mass appeal. Through these visas, South Korea is sure to have more credibility in the cultural milieu and boost cultural tourism by getting its cultural treasures closer to the world. DEBASHREE DUTTA

HUONG NGUYEN, COURTESY OF PIXABAY

Jungle Are 'Coming Back to Do Something Bigger' at Lollapalooza India

The U.K. act's Tom McFarland talks about returning for the first time since 2019, on the back of releasing their fourth album 'Volcano'

ARTHUR WILLIAMS

When U.K. dance music duo Jungle landed in Mumbai for the first time in 2019, Tom McFarland says an instant memory that was imprinted in his mind was the traffic. "I'm a Londoner and there's a lot of traffic there as well but it was quite remarkable [in Mumbai] – it was hot, it was exciting and vibrant. There were a lot of people, a lot of noise. That's what makes you feel alive," he says over a call.

It was an "attack on your senses, but in the very best way," as McFarland puts it. He's ready to dive into it all over again, five years on as Jungle return to India on January 28th, performing at the second edition of Lollapalooza India in Mumbai. It'll be a day before his bandmate and co-founder Josh Lloyd-Watson's birthday, which they'll be celebrating. McFarland adds about what's different now compared to their 2019 visit to headline SulaFest in Nashik, "Five years on, we're a little bit older, a little bit wiser. The idea of what constitutes a good night out has changed a little bit, but I'm just excited to get back into the buzz of the environment." On a tangent, he shouts out U.K. DJ Yung Singh, as a "really amazing Indian DJ" that he highly recommends.

The new year for Jungle starts with business as usual, in a way, after they released their fourth album *Volcano* in 2023 and took it all over the world. Songs like "Back On 74" were clear hits from the 14-track record that also featured notable collaborators like rappers Roots Manuva ("You Ain't No Celebrity") and Bas ("Pretty Little Thing"). It was a "not so busy" first half of the year for Jungle, according to McFarland, as they had a quick turnaround time with *Volcano* done between November 2022 and January 2023. After its release in August, promo was in full swing for a record that stay true to their dance, electronic, soul and hip-hop ways with an energy that fans would have to keep up with.

McFarland says, "Releasing a record is always an exciting moment in your career. Even though this is our fourth album, it still feels very exciting and very new [...] We've done some amazing shows, our biggest shows ever so far. It's just about getting back out there and seeing the fans and enjoying those moments with people that love you and love your music and that you respect and want to give something back to you."

The biggest offering, arguably, was how *Volcano* upped Jungle's already impeccable music video game – creating a full narrative film for the album. McFarland describes it as fulfilling a "lifelong ambition of ours" and shouts out working with choreographer Shay Latukolan, who got major attention after the "Back on 74" video went viral in August. He adds about their approach to the videos on *Volcano*, "I think as soon as we sort of had the record in place, obviously, our thoughts immediately turned to how we can represent it visually on screen." He cites Daft Punk's Interstella *5555* that accompanied the 2001 album *Discovery* as an influence and pulling something off on that scale was "a real testament to our artistic vision."

Being on their own label since the last two albums is something that helps, McFarland suggests. "We don't have anyone to tell us that something's a stupid idea and it probably was a bit of a stupid idea at the time and probably cost us too much money. But for us, the art is bigger than the commerce. It means more to us and it means that we can get amazing moments," he adds.

Ask him if he considers Jungle to be up for making a rock opera-equivalent film or musical in their own way and McFarland points to how *Volcano* feels like "some sort of modern soul ballet." He adds, "For us, it just opens the door to any possibility now." What about a soundtrack to a feature film? McFarland takes a breath before he mentions the documentary he's finished writing music for. He says, "I hope that one day we can fulfill all our ambitions or dreams because as an artist, that's what you want to do [...] I think doing a full movie soundtrack or TV series stuff is something that we would very much enjoy."

Meanwhile, looking ahead to Lollapalooza India, McFarland says he's excited to see Sting, who's playing the same day as them. "I'm really excited to go find new things that I maybe haven't heard before," he says.

ANURAG TAGAT

Nivé Releases Stirring New Single 'Sahara'

The New Delhi-bred singer-songwriter's track has been produced by Pranshu Jha

New Delhi-bred singer-songwriter Nivedita Lakra aka Nivé is out with a brand-new single in the shape of the melancholic offering "Sahara." The track – which has been produced by Pranshu Jha – follows "ADHD" which was released earlier this year. In this interview with Lakra, she talks about how she overcame addiction, writing "Sahara," what she's got planned next and more.

We last wrote about you when you released "Nuts 4 U" in 2021, what have you been up to since then?
After COVID my first move was to change my city and get a job as soon as possible. I wanted to break free, and I could not stop myself from taking hold of any opportunities that came my way, especially musically. Bangalore seemed like the best place that could satisfy my home and passion. Little did I know that I was entering the darkest phase of my life. I did take drugs and I believed that it could make you do things that take 12 hours in just an hour with the focus it gives you. I accommodated this in my daily life and then started the downfall. Tree houses were lost, a job lost a relationship that worked because I have an angel in my life. I had to move back home, and my mother asked me politely if I needed help, I said yes and then I was institutionalized for 90 days. Those were the most mind-boggling and expanding 90 days for me, with no phones and people with addiction and mental illness around me, I had a lot of perspective that I could change. Since I've been out of the institution, I've been living my life clean, free and happy. The best part is I have so much new music and have channeled it all.

When did you write "Sahara" and what can you tell me about it?
'Sahara' is a sad song, it talks about how one could look for any reason to reject the love life wants to give you, just so you could have another high. I repeat the lines 'Kismat, paisa nasha, pyaar' over and over because I had no idea about how things actually worked, probably my brain had gone for a toss. Now that I look back, I subconsciously was talking about how you could take destiny into your own hands if you were not such a bummer.

What was the recording process like for this song?
Recording the song was as painful as writing the song as performing it because it's a constant reminder of a life that I used to live previously, and I can't relate to that person anymore because I truly think that I have taken a rebirth after my institution journey. 'Sahara' will always remain the most painful song for me, it brings tears to my eyes occasionally.

What's next?
A lot of releases are lined up, I've never had such efficiency and stability in my life. The next one is a very beautiful channelization as well. DAVID BRITTO

@PRISON_IN_HEAVEN

New Album 'Suburban Prose' Showcases The Lightyears Explode's Emotional Side

The Mumbai pop/punk band pack in plenty across eight songs

If you go back to the albums released in 2013 within the Indian independent music scene, one record that stands out is Mumbai pop/punk outfit The Lightyears Explode's 10-track debut effort *The Revenge of Kalicharan*. Since then, the band's lineup has altered, with drummer Jeremy D'Souza replacing Aaron Carvalho and guitarist Jishnu Guha aka Short Round coming on board as a live member, however, the group's founders in vocalist-guitarist Saurabh Roy and bassist Shalom Benjamin have kept going strong.

With a four-track EP entitled *Mellow* released in 2020 and the bubbly "Nostalgia 99" that came out in 2021, The Lightyears Explode are now out with their first full-length album in 10 years in the shape of the eight-track *Suburban Prose*. Roy says, "I have immense respect for the album as a format. After we released our single 'Nostalgia 99' I started thinking about an album and felt ready to commit to the idea." He adds, "I was aware of when our last album came out and didn't want it to be more than 10 years between albums, so we pushed the release to this year."

The band began teasing *Suburban Prose* earlier this year with the singles "Pills," "Fighting With Your Family," "Fake It! Shake It! Make It!" and "Big Big Love." Ask Roy when the songs began taking shape for the record and he says, "Some ideas are older than our EP like 'Literally Kicks,' but I started assembling ideas and demos seriously at the end of 2021. These early demos changed dramatically during the [production] process and a lot of the songs were brand new. 'Pills' was the first completed song and set the standard and template we wanted for the album."

The album that has been made is a superb-sounding body of work with the band's deft touch of distortion and punk structures that sit perfectly together. "Sonically we wanted everything to be quite economical, we wanted loud and quiet dynamics," says Roy.

Lyrically Roy wanted to pull back the curtain from the usual "bravado and confidence" we'd heard earlier. Across the album, the vocalist sings about things that make him feel vulnerable such as "mental health, decaying friendships, inter-family political differences and feeling unfulfilled with some social circles, but not knowing how to break out of it."

Suburban Prose was produced by Roy while Benjamin and D'Souza contributed drums and bass respectively. Guha is also heard on the record and credited for additional guitar and backing vocals on a few of the songs. Ganesh Singaram mixed the album while Daniel Natoli produced it.

With this record now out of the way, the band is setting out to release a few more singles and are also prepping to record a live album. Roy says, "We feel really good about our live set and think it would be a good time to give it a shot."

DAVID BRITTO

"Sonically we wanted everything [on the album] to be quite economical, we wanted loud and quiet dynamics," says Roy.

ABHISHEK GUPTA

K-Drama Flashback: 'Shopping King Louie'

One of the best titles in an extensive roster of superhit K-dramas that was released in 2016, starring Seo In-guk and Nam Ji-hyun

Shopping King Louie — alternatively, *Shopaholic Louis*—became one of the iconic K-dramas in 2016. The year recalls a pig-flying period supplementing the Hallyu wave with superhits like *W*, *Uncontrollably Fond*, *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo*, *Love in the Moonlight*, *The K2*, *Descendants of the Sun*, *The Legend of the Blue Sea*, *Hwarang*, *Guardian: The Lonely and Great God*, et cetera. Unequivocally *Shopping King Louie* was one of the best among the titles helmed by director Lee Sang-yeob and starring blue-chip Korean actors Seo In-guk and Nam Ji-hyun.

Shopping King Louie has a fuzzy feel, an unexpected break from the stereotypical K-dramas with rom-coms; it is easy on the eyes.

Seo's Louie, or Kang Ji-sung—the lone surviving successor to the financial clique Gold Group—is the blue-eyed boy of its chairperson, Choi Il-soon (Kim Young-ok), his grandmother. She, dotes him to death, keeping him spoiled and overprotected in France, with all at his beck and call. Even so, that doesn't do him any good—his reclusive life numbs the otherwise opulence, begging for variety. Louie, 25, thus turns to retail therapy, acquiring a shopping addiction as a side effect.

Things were dragging along as usual, abruptly cut short by a car crash, reducing the prince to a pauper and landing Louie on the streets. He wakes up to lost memories and is homeless without access to money or food. On the flip side, Ko Bok-shil, 21 (Nam), is a country cousin, nimble on her feet, and malleable to conditions. Coincidentally, when in Seoul, she meets Louie, and as fate would have it, they start living together.

Bok-shil earns hard, but Louie still indulges in his wasteful spending habits and lives off of her income, frustrating the girl, who is still oblivious to his roots. But it doesn't take much for his naivete and how he peers at her defenseless to make her heart race. As much as he needs her, she strives to protect him and keep him at ease.

Unbeknownst to both, emotional proximity triggers feelings growing fonder.

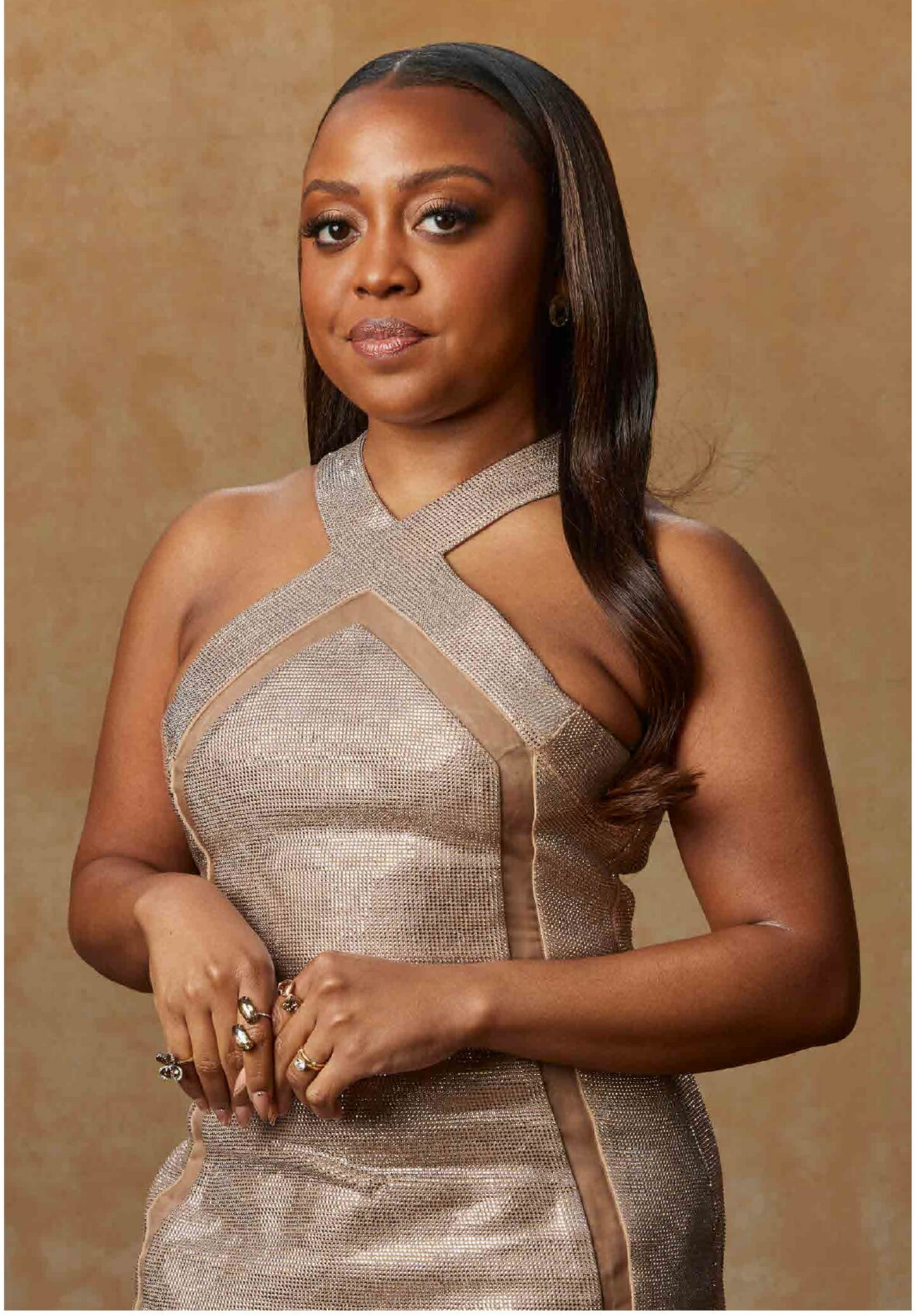
With each step through their journey, Louie and Bok-shil fall deeper in love. She begins to apprise him of money's value and how it frequently works for serving the needy instead of just for personal pleasure. Conversely, she acknowledges that each of us satisfies distinctive demands based on unique values, something, that impacts our approach to life and how much we spend.

Shopping King Louie has a fuzzy feel, an unexpected break from the stereotypical K-dramas with rom-coms, is easy on the eyes, and its premise lacks anything exceedingly intricate or sinister. Still, what it does have is beneficial in that it weaves a more profound lesson within the humor and tender romantic scenes between the two dimwitted characters. As a standalone K-drama, I can still turn to it and watch it again for good cheer. There are further aspects to the narrative that I am not including here. Check out the show if you haven't already.

COURTESY OF MBC

Louie, as opposed to many of the quintessential heroes from Korean dramas—dashing, debonaire, and imposing, stays in memory for being naïve and odd, and he becomes reliant, possibly Seo's most effective switch-up as a male lead—but that anomaly strikes a chord; he's also the romantic hero into the bargain—Louis steals Bok-shil's heart—and the two make an endearing, enduring image of love's young dream. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

왕자님 등장



Q&A

Quinta Brunson

The creator and star of 'Abbott Elementary' talks Emmys, mental health, and the meaning of success

By CT JONES

For Quinta Brunson, the end of the months-long SAG-AFTRA strike doesn't mean a return to the familiar. Instead, it's a chance for the Emmy Award-winning writer, producer, and actress to join her same set with a brand-new view on life, hard work, and stability.

The creator of ABC's hit sitcom *Abbott Elementary,* Brunson has experienced a meteoric rise in Hollywood that many Tinseltown hopefuls could only dream of. After a number of viral video series including *The Girl Who Has Never Been on a Nice Date* landed her a production deal at BuzzFeed, Brunson leveraged her internet experience and sharp comedic timing into two network pilots. But they never aired. So Brunson turned to her hometown of Philadelphia, taking inspiration from her mother's longtime career as a teacher, and *Abbott Elementary* was born. For Brunson, the work hasn't slowed since.

"The most hectic a day could get is while we're filming, writing, and airing," Brunson explains, rattling off a daunting day of production as easily as she spells her name. "And then there's an event after work, so I have hair and makeup for that, and then the event, and then I get home and go to sleep and have to start it all over."

It's an intimidating process on its own, one made more exhausting by the fact that Brunson wrote *Abbott* while most of America was lost in a cycle of fear and lack of work during the pandemic. When the WGA and SAG strikes hit, the writer best celebrated for almost single-handedly reviving the network sitcom had to do something much harder: learn how to take care of herself.

Brunson sat in her house. She didn't write. She didn't create. She got a therapist. And now, after almost six months of a Hollywood shutdown, she's returning to the upcoming award season and a filming schedule with a renewed desire to stay present and say no.

The third season of *Abbott Elementary,* which returns to ABC on Feb. 7, puts Brunson in an unknown class — no longer a newcomer, she's an established success story ready to take on a comedy category filled to the brim with hourlong dramedies.

For Brunson, this new era will also answer questions about the trajectory of her career. While *Abbott*'s a hit, TV shows don't last forever. And for the one that she refers to as "her baby," Brunson's next battle might be recognizing when it's grown up.

"If this season feels good to me by the time we finish, I think that it'll show me whether or not it can go on without me," Brunson says. "But I want to be with the show as long as it's on the air. I'm thinking about other things, but not more than I'm thinking about *Abbott*."

You didn't just have the SAG strike, you also had the WGA strike. What did that look like for you?

I'm used to working. And when it comes to what I do for a living, it's really hard not to work. It's kind of being like, "Hey, don't be creative until we solve these issues." That's tough. So after adjusting to that, I used it as a period to get my mental and physical health together. Because I realized that that was something I wasn't focused on while we were making *Abbott*. From the first season to the second season, it felt like one huge period of time that I didn't really have rest. So I had to start treating the strikes as my opportunity to have a pause. I was able to move my head from up out of the ground and be like, "Oh, my God, so much has changed." I kind of had to catch up to where I was now.

To be transparent, I started actually thinking about my mental health and feeling that a therapist was necessary. That was something I was really proud of, because I don't think I would have gotten the time to think to do that if I had gone straight into another season of *Abbott*.

It's incredibly surprising to hear that you didn't have a therapist before because that makes everything you were handling so much more impressive.

That was another thing I learned for myself. I was like, "Stop being impressive. Stop." Us [Black women] being impressive comes with a lot of weight. And it's this invisible weight. We are so good at showing up and looking fine, and you will not know — and maybe we won't even know — that the world is on fire behind us.

This year, I really want to focus on not taking on as much, so that I give myself more time to check in emotionally. On my show, I love to go to every edit, every sound mix, every single session. But I have to start telling myself, "No, you're not gonna go to that sound mix. You're gonna go home and you're gonna rest." Because in rest is when you do find the time to think, and grieve, and love yourself.

What does it look like for you to let that pressure go and also still care so wholeheartedly about making sure everything across the show is aligning?

It's scary because *Abbott* in particular is just so much of my DNA. I feel so spiritually connected to it. So it's really hard when I say I want to pull back in some areas, because I feel like if I'm not there, then something will be different. But I can't think of it that way. My team across the board — writers, production, everyone

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN DOPERALSKI FOR "VARIETY"

on *Abbott* — is so incredible. I have to trust the trust I have in them.

Being surrounded by so many kids all day, both as a producer and as a character who is a teacher, what are your thoughts on motherhood? And have they evolved at all?

There was a time where I was like, "Oh, yeah, I definitely want to be pregnant and have a baby. I can't wait." But then I started really thinking that when I become a mother, I'm gonna go balls to the wall. Because that'll be the greatest creation I could ever make, and I will focus my attention on that baby 100 percent. So that makes me think motherhood won't be in the picture for me for a while because I don't know if I have the time that I'd like to dedicate to a child. I also don't think I'm ready to sacrifice that much of my time to another human being.

Does it ever frustrate you being so successful that people assume you're representative of all Black women, or all Black comedians?

I don't feel like I get it as much as others, and that's on purpose. I didn't really want to be responsible for an entire race and an entire sex. It's just not my M.O. I don't feel strong enough to carry that. I don't think it's for any of us [to carry].

A weird moment for me was when I was nominated for Emmys last year. The headline became, "The first Black woman to be nominated for three [Comedy] Emmys" in one year. I didn't really know it until I saw the headline and was like, "That's crazy. That's cool." But that became the main narrative. Which once again, still cool, still proud of that. But it's just interesting how no matter what, we have to carry these things. Then, when you get in interviews, I'm [like], "Fuck, let me just get my shit together." I need to be prepared to talk about Black history at any moment. I didn't have that prepared today. I just wanted to talk about my cat and my show. I didn't sign up to be the Sojourner Truth [of sitcoms].

Did this rapid rise to fame change your approach to relationships?

Fame is so nebulous now because there's so many different ways to be famous. I am a very friendly person. I love talking to people. But I do naturally have to be a bit more cautious about my space because I have to acknowledge something that is heightened these days, which is parasocial relationships. And the relationships people can form with you overtaking the actual relationship they can have with you.

I have people I've become great friends with, who I have met after the quote-unquote fame. And those have been wonderful relationships because as I've been on this journey, things have changed in my life that old friends from back home or friends who aren't doing the same things can't necessarily relate to. So it's been wonderful to find really positive new relationships.

And people love seeing friends who you then get to have on projects. I'm thinking of how folks reacted on TikTok to a clip of you and Ayo Edebiri at a Beyoncé concert meeting Zendaya.

People are like, "Ayo [Edebiri] and Quinta became friends through *Abbott*!" But we've known each other for eight years. And now we're just at this place where we're fortunate enough to get to work with each other on our projects. Ayo's a special case because it's really unique for your friend to go through something similar at the same time, and being able to help each other through these things and hit each other up. Like, "Are you going to this event?" "Did this weird thing happen with you?" "What do you do when this happens?"

It's just such a fun relationship to have with someone who already was my friend, someone who is another Black woman in this industry. Because there's so many fascinating times where you could gaslight yourself out of something. And then you talk to other Black girls and it's like, "Oh, OK." That's kind of another thing I'm so grateful to have her for, and know I can talk to her on a very, very direct, basic level. Ayo's practically family. We always have to tell people we were friends before sisters onscreen.

I'm really curious: Has your definition of success changed at all?

When I first started working at BuzzFeed, I felt successful. I was like, "Oh, my God, I have a job. I get to be creative." At the time, I was making more money than I ever thought I would make in my life. I think for me goals and success are really different. I don't feel as though I'm chasing success. So this is beyond success — to have a show that people love. To have a house, even.

It's weird how I was like, "I'll probably live in apartments for the rest of my life." I never thought I'd have a house. Isn't that crazy? But I will always have goals that will push me to another place creatively, because goals make me feel like life is worth living. But overall, I feel extremely successful. I feel like I am not only my ancestors' wildest dreams but also *my* wildest dreams. Little-kid me is like, "Girl, that's crazy. You're friends with Amy Poehler. That's insane."

How does it feel going from such a stagnant time during the strike directly back into not only a new season of *Abbott* but the upcoming Emmys?

It's still so exciting. It's still an honor. During the time off, I had time to understand what happened during a lot of the award season last year. We were filming *Abbott* during the award season last year, so we're at these award shows like, "We gotta be up at five tomorrow." I'm in notes, I'm in emails while the show's going on.

Sometimes I can find certain things to focus on, and for me during the last cycle, it was Sheryl [Lee Ralph] winning that really stuck with me more than anything. But then I had the time off to be like, "Wow!" For a first season on a network show, we were nominated for seven Emmys with a predominantly Black cast and an actual comedy in a world where the rest of our category is basically dramas.

You've got to bring Little Quinta to the Emmys with you.

That's a good suggestion, that's so smart. She pops out sometimes and those are such magical moments for me. Like, one time I saw James Earl Jones — I didn't talk to him or anything — but the little kid in me jumped out. I wanted to be a crazy child again. And those are moments that really keep you going. So I will be bringing my little self to the Emmys.

As a writer, you don't just have one idea and say, "That's good for the rest of my life." So how often do you think about other projects outside of *Abbott*? Do you ever think you would be able to let the show go on without you?

This third season will be interesting because that'll answer a lot of those questions for me.

TV shows feel like babies, where the first season is an infant, second season is a two-year-old, and in the third season it's like a three-year-old. You know this kid's personality. They have their wants. So if this season feels good to me by the time we finish, I think that it'll show me whether or not it can go on without me. But I want to be with the show as long as it's on the air because I was really intentional about *Abbott,* and I intended to be with it until it was done.

How do you turn all of this pressure and attention into a product you can be proud of? How do you celebrate the wins?

That's what's so fun about going right with *Abbott.* Like a couple of days ago, I had a very rough day. The reality of the world was very apparent and just hit me at every turn. And then I went to work and it was all gone. *Abbott* gets to feel like this bubble where my crew and I have this oasis where we get to create, and it makes us feel like kids again.

That's the feeling I always want to have when I'm creating, whether anyone sees it or not. I want to make sure I look at this thing and I'm proud of it. I care about making the people around me happy, of course, and my family and my friends; and of course I care about making the world laugh. But what's great about zeroing in is that I'm just focused on wanting to make something that I can be proud of. And that helps me celebrate the wins. ®

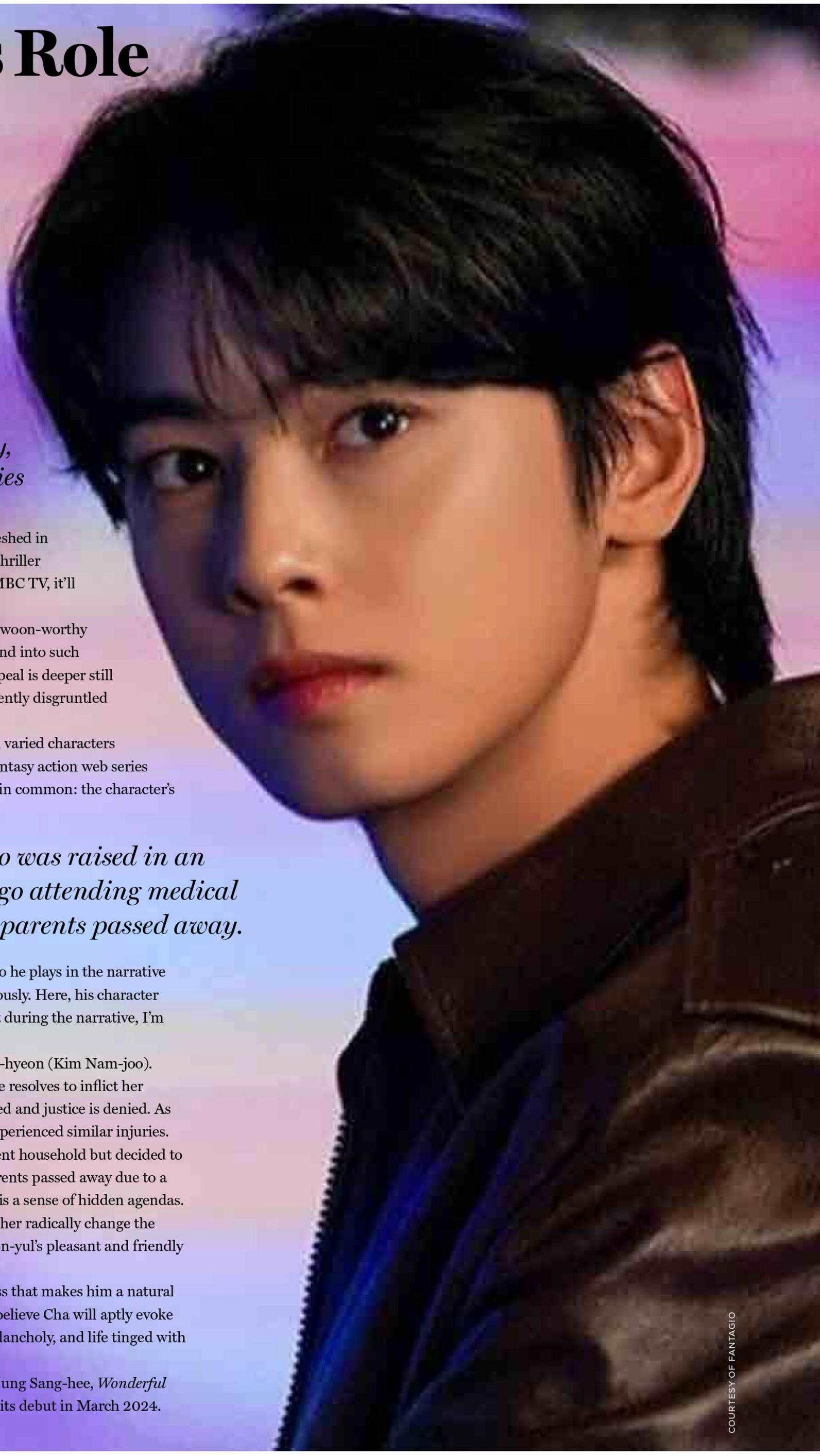
Brunson (center) and crew go for the gold on *Abbott.*

"It's weird how I was like, 'I'll probably live in apartments for the rest of my life,'" Brunson says. "I never thought I'd have a house. Isn't that crazy?"

GILLES MINGASSON/ABC

Cha Eun-woo's Role Is Shrouded in Mystery in 'Wonderful World'

In the drama, a mother resolves retribution when her son dies tragically, and the culprit is let off by the authorities



COURTESY OF FANTAGIO

CHA EUN-WOO(ASTRO) will have an enigmatic man enmeshed in a web of convoluted scenarios in the upcoming mystery thriller revenge drama series *Wonderful World*. Premiering on MBC TV, it'll be available for streaming on Disney+ in specific regions.

Typically portrayed as a romantic hero, Cha effortlessly crafts swoon-worthy moments with the heroine. It comes easily to the idol actor to blend into such roles and take on the profound feelings required of them. The appeal is deeper still since he often paints a Byronic hero who is attractive while frequently disgruntled but ultimately hopelessly in love.

Cha has exhibited a similar pattern, albeit that he has taken on varied characters in productions including the action thriller *Decibel* (2022) and fantasy action web series *Island* (2022–2023). His depictions, meanwhile, have one thing in common: the character's emotions are always nuanced.

Cha will play Kwon Seon-yul, who was raised in an affluent household but decided to forgo attending medical school and lead a tough life when his parents passed away.

While his part in *Wonderful World* will fit that description, who he plays in the narrative is significantly different from the ones we have seen him in previously. Here, his character is shrouded in mystery, so unless facts progressively come to light during the narrative, I'm guessing we should expect a subdued act from him.

Wonderful World follows famed psychology professor Eun Soo-hyeon (Kim Nam-joo). When she tragically loses her son, her entire world falls apart. She resolves to inflict her punishment on the culprit once the perpetrator is legally pardoned and justice is denied. As she works to solve the case, she interacts with others who have experienced similar injuries.

Cha will play Kwon Seon-yul, a guy who was raised in an affluent household but decided to forgo attending medical school and lead a tough life when his parents passed away due to a string of tragedies. Even though Seon-yul appears friendly, there is a sense of hidden agendas. His encounter with Soo-hyeon and the incident that ensues with her radically change the course of his affairs. The dark and evil truth that lurks within Seon-yul's pleasant and friendly façade is hardly known to Soo-hyeon.

Perhaps Cha Eun-woo's presence radiates a sense of remoteness that makes him a natural match for Kwon Seon-yul and the reclusive man he turns into. I believe Cha will aptly evoke Seon-yul's remorse, resentment, complexities, turbulent past, melancholy, and life tinged with pessimism.

Written by Kim Ji-eun and directed by Lee Seung-young and Jung Sang-hee, *Wonderful World* also stars Kim Kang-woo and Lim Se-mi. It is set to make its debut in March 2024.

DEBASHREE DUTTA

Rolling Stone

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10 Best Indian Albums of 2023

From Komorebi's innovative prowess to Dhanji's dark triumph to Indian Ocean's much-needed reminder of the times, here are our favorite albums this year, ranked

By Anurag Tagat and David Britto

INDIA'S MUSIC scene has been booming this year, and we're here to show you the absolute best albums that made everyone groove and feel some serious vibes. From classic melodies to brand-new sounds that'll get you dancing, these albums are the crème de la crème.

10. Bulli Bainbridge – *Seasons (feat. Various Artists)*

AFTER TEASING HIS debut album with two singles at the end of 2022, Mumbai-based producer Zain Calcuttawala, aka Bulli Bainbridge, dropped his seven-track album *Seasons* at the top of 2023. The record includes a host of collaborators such as vocalist Shalmali Kholgade, rapper Bob Omulo aka Bobkat (from reggae/hip-hop group Bombay Bassment), singer Anusha Ramasubramoney aka Nushious (one half of singer-songwriter duo Second Sight), seasoned vocalist-producer Siddharth Basrur, multi-faceted artist Trichia Grace-Ann Rebello, vocalist-guitarist and producer Ankit Dayal (from alt-rockers Spud in the Box) and Nigerian producer Ade. Calcuttawala's vision mixed with his collaborators' exceptional talent shape the record into an immersive listen that is filled with elegant orchestral arrangements, slick R&B moments, striking hip-hop offerings, as well as wholesome ballads. – DAVID BRITT

9. Ankur Tewari – *Akela*

A PANDEMIC ALBUM—music that was written or had its origins in the isolation period of lockdowns—should hardly be relevant any longer, considering we're all roaringly celebrating being out and about, right? Ankur Tewari finds a way to take us back to the universality of that time without too many specific references on his album *Akela*. With the deft, atmospheric production touch of Rohan Ramanna, Tewari's usually acoustic sound gets melancholy and soul-searching, best heard on the title track and songs like "Parwaana" and the eight-and-a-half-minute closer "Sawaal." The flittering guitars on "Ik Dooje Ke Liye" adds a new dimension to Tewari's songwriting. He's arguably had one of his best years creatively, being part of soundtracks like *The Archies*, *Made In Heaven Season 2*, *Kho Gaye Hum Kahan* and the project *Coke Studio Bharat*. – ANURAG TAGAT

8. Jamna Paar – *Strangers from Past Life*

NEW DELHI BASSIST Gaurav Balani (from rockers Parikrama and electro-rockers Inalab) and flautist Shashank Singhania's electronica duo Jamna Paar released their debut eight-track full-length album *Strangers from Past Life* this year. The pair packs in plenty of soundscapes throughout the record, from drum n bass to Indian classical and more. The album also includes a host ocollaborators such as Apeksha Dandekar, Aditi Singh Sharma, Saptak Chatterjee, and others to help bring the songs to life. – D.B.

7. Dreamhour – *Now That We Are Here*

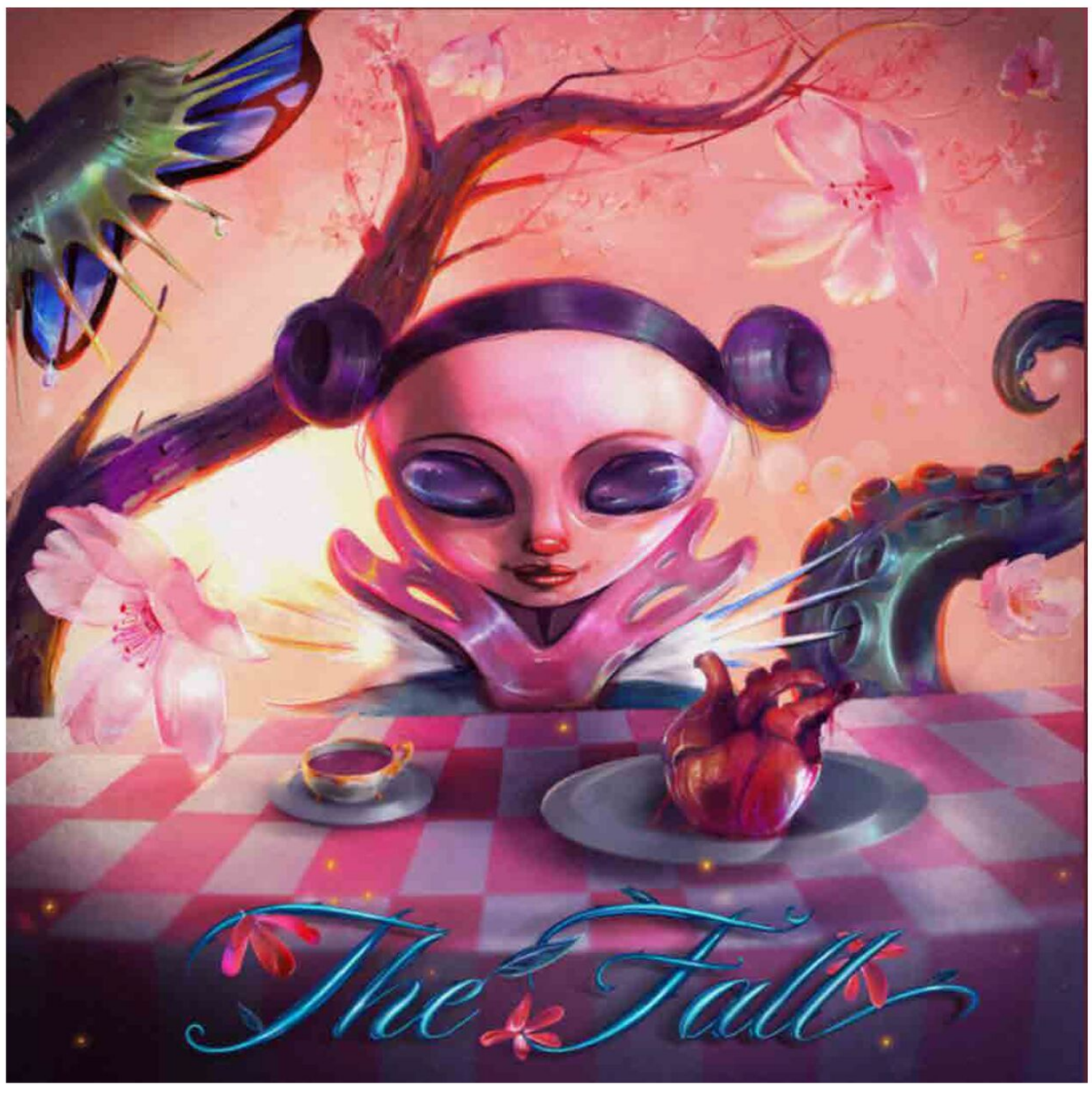
DEBO SANYAL AKA Dreamhour, the Siliguri-based producer-singer, keeps finding new ways to make synthwave exciting, and there are perhaps only a few who can stick to a niche the way he has. With his latest album, *Now That We Are Here*, there are more elements of soul and pop mixed in with retro synths and more. With a few assists from vocalist Dokodoko, there are indefatigable synth-pop cuts like "It's A Song," "She's Everything" and "Own Tonight." Dreamhour sticks to more indulgent retro-wave as well, on songs like "Pulp Motel" and the Bollywood synth-era informed "Rajdoot." - A.T.

6. Dhanji – *RUAB*

JUST LIKE ITS hard-to-define title, Ahmedabad artist Dhanji's debut album *RUAB* defies genres, thematic expectations within desi hip-hop, and more across 11 songs and 46 minutes. It's funky, it's raging, it's resolute, and everything in between lives up to the prolific hip-hop artist's underground cred. Dhanji raps, scowls, and stretches the linguistic boundaries of Hindi, Gujarati, and English in his care-a-damn way heard on previous mixtapes, but makes it even darker yet glorious. "RVAB" is funk-rap perfection, while "Magaj Ka Bimari" flitters like the many sides of Dhanji's mind, while the collab-heavy "What Would the Credit Department Do?" brings in Siyaahi, Arpit Bala, Faizan, Bagi Munda and more for killer verses. – A.T.

5. Gutslit – *Carnal*

MUMBAI METALLERS Gutslit's latest album, *Carnal* is an unrelenting sonic assault that reaffirms the band's status as torchbearers of extreme metal in India. The album showcases Gutslit's uncompromising aggression and technical prowess. With blistering guitar riffs, thunderous drumming, and guttural vocals, Carnal unleashes a visceral onslaught that encapsulates the essence of the group's sound. The band's mastery in crafting intricate compositions is evident, creating a relentless and chaotic atmosphere throughout the album. The record is a testament to the band's unbridled ferocity and musical precision. – D.B.



4. Komorebi – *The Fall*

NEW DELHI PRODUCER-VOCALIST Tarana Marwah, aka Komorebi, crafts a sonic journey that transcends genres on her seven-track album, *The Fall*. This avant-garde body of work is a testament to Marwah's innovative prowess. The album's ethereal blend of electronic, indie, and experimental elements creates a mesmerizing soundscape that captivates from the first note. Marwah's distinctive vocals, coupled with intricate production, weave a narrative that is both introspective and expansive. *The Fall* is not just an album; it's an immersive experience that challenges musical boundaries. – D.B.

3. Sandunes – *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*

MUMBAI PRODUCER

Sandunes' latest album, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, is a captivating sonic odyssey that unfolds with immersive brilliance. Through the record, Sandunes juxtaposes electronic, ambient, and various other soundscapes into a seamless tapestry of melodies. Each track is a meticulously crafted sonic landscape that takes listeners on a journey of reflection and emotion. The intricate production, coupled with Sandunes' evocative musicality, creates an otherworldly experience. The Ground Beneath Her Feet is a testament to Sandunes' artistic evolution, solidifying her position as a trailblazer in the realm of electronic music and captivating audiences with her innovative compositions. – **D.B.**

2. Indian Ocean – *Tu Hai*

ON THEIR first album since 2014's *Tandanu*, New Delhi fusion stalwarts Indian Ocean still carry their protest music torch high, albeit in their own way. *Tu Hai* is focused more on humanity's ecological footprint and all the other things that manipulate them. Through a rousing chorus of voices, they bat for hope on "Jaadu Maaya," take on an enriching saxophone-aided excursion with "Jungle" and invite veteran percussionist Vikku Vinayakram on the playful "Iss Tan Dhan." Cavernous fusion-psychedelic experiments abound as well, on the two-part title track and "Rebirth," proving that Indian Ocean are still doing it their way amid changing times. - **A.T.**

1. Seedhe Maut – *Lunch Break*

WE CAN ARGUE all day about quantity vs quality in Desi hip-hop, but Seedhe Maut are apex predator when it comes to both. Their mixtape *Lunch Break* may have been intended as an offering to fans to hold them over until their next album arrives—the follow-up to Nayaab—but it's now found its place in the Indian hip-hop canon. From Badshah to Bandzo3rd to KR$NA and Faris Shafi, Seedhe Maut blurs boundaries and delivers 30 tracks spanning 85 minutes of stories about growing up but never leaving the past too far behind. In a year that gave us stellar Hindi hip-hop albums across the board – Yungsta's Meen, Dakait's Dev Nagri Aur Main, and of course, KING's *New Life*—Seedhe Maut showed they're one of the most prolific in the country. - **A.T.**

10 Best Indian EPs of 2023

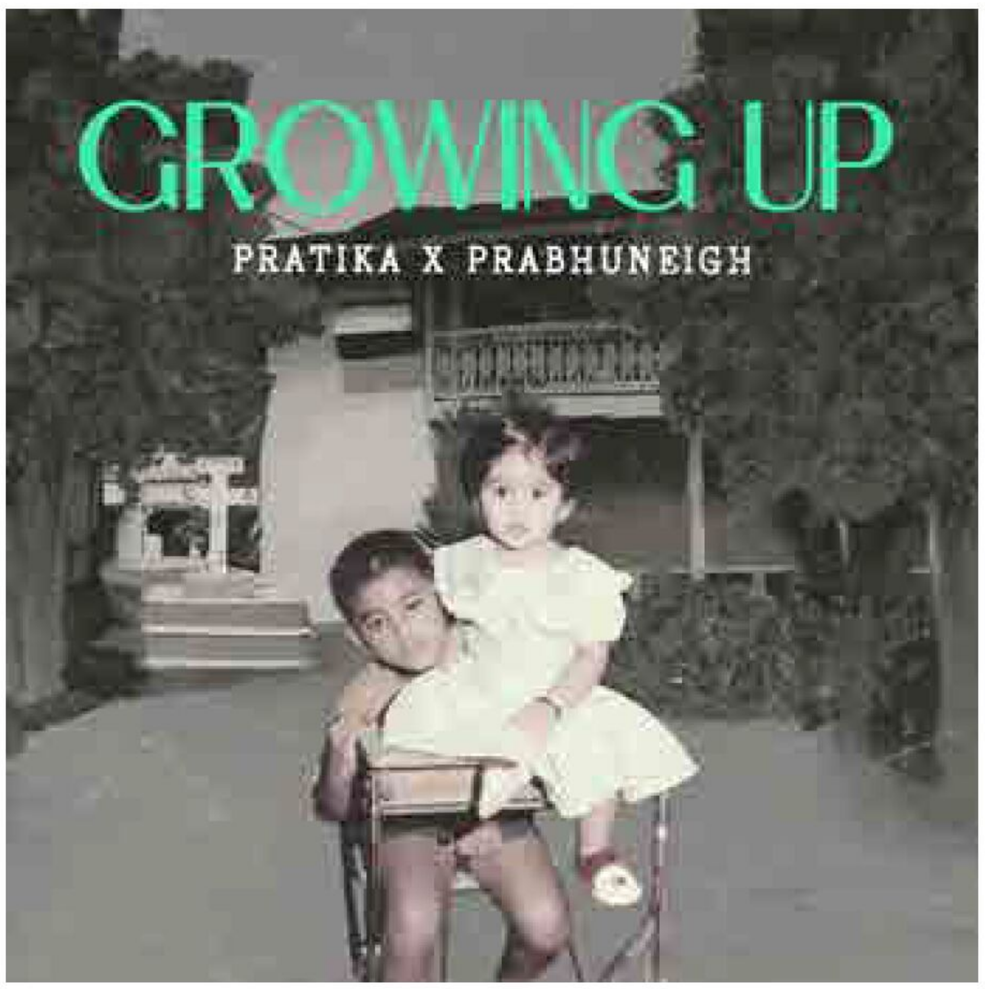
It's been a great year for music enthusiasts

By Anurag Tagat and David Britto

FROM A BROTHERHOOD cemented by Raftaar and Prabh Deep and When Chai Met Toast's bright proclamations to RANJ x Clifr's care-a-damn genre-hopping and superb blues by The Arinjoy Trio, here are our favorite EPs of the year, ranked.

10. Pratika, PrabhuNeigh – *Growing Up*

MUMBAI MUSICIAN siblings Pratika and Pritesh Prabhune have been mainstays and constantly evolved, but their EP *Growing Up* was about bringing it back to their roots of growing up with rap metal, rock and electronica. On production duties, Pritesh aka PrabhuNeigh, is gritty and groovy across five tracks. But where Growing Up scores high is in Pratika's unpolished, no-holds-barred narration of everything she's seen growing up middle-class India since their days in Bandra, Mumbai. Everything from morally bankrupt local goons she had to call family to experiences of sexual abuse and more, Pratika calls them all out and viciously takes them all down on songs like "Growing Up," "Lawrie" and "Survival." – **ANURAG TAGAT**



9. Zohran Miranda – *Time for Two*

MUMBAI-BASED guitarist-vocalist Zohran Miranda unveils his musical evolution across his five-track debut EP *Time for Two*. Co-produced with Jovian Soans, the record weaves a retro-modern pop sound, incorporating elements of R&B, soul, funk, and electro-dance. Miranda, joined by singers Yamini Lavanian and pop duo Simetri, explores themes of expansion and ascension, narrating his journey from self-doubt to self-discovery. The EP features Miranda's juicing guitar parts and scintillating solos too. **– DAVID BRITT**

8. Kasck – *Deal with the Devil*

PUNE THRASH metallers Kasck unleashed their fiery debut EP *Deal with the Devil* earlier this year. The band delivers a must-listen for thrash metal enthusiasts. The four-track EP showcases chugging distorted guitars, euphoric drums and growly vocals on "The Punisher" and "A Thousand Deaths." Lyrically, themes of self-existence, corruption and terror echo through the record. **– D.B.**

7. Gooth – *Golden Boy*

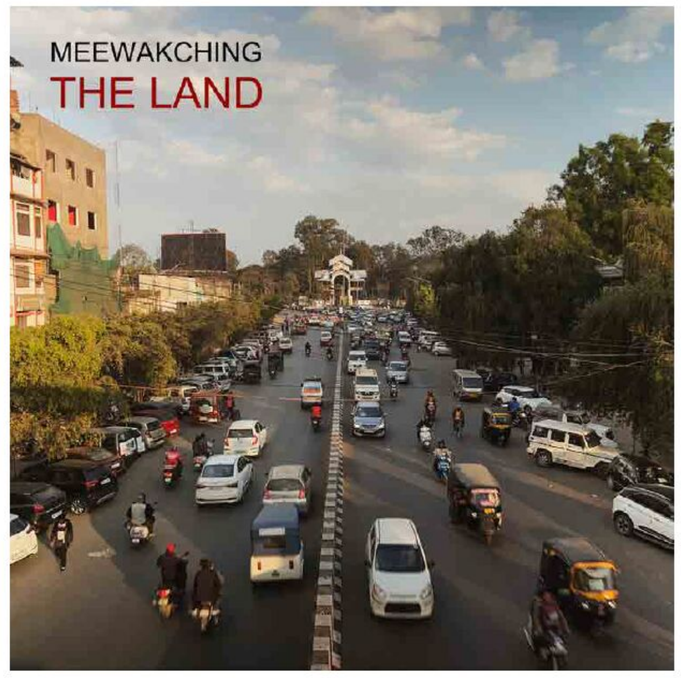
CHENNAI ARTIST Gooth's debut EP *Golden Boy* is among the strongest releases this year because it ticks one very important box when it comes to versatility – the singer-songwriter and producer manages to sound like a different artist on each of the five tracks he's clearly painstakingly crafted. "Her Song" trudges darkly but places dreamy synth to create a wholly unsettling yet alluring sound, while "Nobody Can" has the hip-hop/pop might that can elevate it to club-banger status. "Amber" has a distorted bassline running through it and noise. "Sweater Weather" may not ever exist in Chennai, but it stands for a fantastical thought that drives a dreamy song with hip-hop crew Eastcoastmovement. "Balter" is spectral, which kind of best sums up the genre-defying intent that Gooth has on *Golden Boy*. **- A.T.**

6. When Chai Met Toast – *LYTS*

KERALA INDIE folk-rock outfit When Chai Met Toast take you own a sublime journey on their four-track EP *LYTS*. The record opens with the energetic "sushi song" before we hear the melancholic "so beautiful, with you." The EP then moves forward with the emotive "hearts never break" before it closes with the indie rock-leaning "love you the same." Throughout the record, the band offers plenty of dynamics and exquisite vocals, making it quite the earworm. – D.B.

4. Dhruv Visvanath – *Dancing In The Dark*

NEW DELHI guitar maverick Dhruv Visvananth's commitment to his craft shines through on his lively six-track EP *Dancing In The Dark*. Across six tracks, he infuses his percussive acoustic style with a contagious energy, evident in standout tunes like "Gimme Love" and "Moondance" featuring the vocals of Benny Dayal. The sparkling production choices and positive lyrical reinforcements add vibrancy to the collection. Tracks like "Alone" and "Little Fingers" showcase his playful plucking and harmonies, while "Underworld" exudes cinematic lushness and "Separately Together" radiates roaring electric energy. – D.B.



5. Meewakching – *The Land*

WHEN THEY need it the most, Manipur has a defiant rock band speaking on behalf of the strife-torn state that's been shunted out of urgent attention since May this year. Meewakching's *The Land* EP opens with "Of Murder and Mayhem," the drums, bass and riffs ring with a Strokes-like indie-rock shimmer as they ask, "We haven't learned who the real enemy is, have we?" When there's still less and less heard about Manipur and how (and if) it is hobbling back to normalcy, The Land serves as an important record of protest – from the punk rock flash of "Absolute Minority" to the dreamy, despairing rock of "Motorik Rhetorik." Often always singing in Manipuri, this mostly English EP is perhaps Meewakching's way of making sure the message from the state remains accessible, as it should. – A.T.

3. RANJ x Clifr – *Antihero*

PUSHING BOUNDARIES until they break, Bengaluru-based duo RANJ x Clifr's EP *Antihero* is the statement of intent about their place in the country's music terrain. While 593, Vol. I from 2021 (with producer Issamood) was much acclaimed, *Antihero* powers into all kinds of genre blends – from house ("BOO!") to UK grime to Afrobeats ("After Afters") and pop. RANJ doesn't waste a single second on this seven-track record with her rap and vocal prowess and shows how it's done. Clifr's production palette makes Antihero an elastic trip, and the duo eventually teams up with beatsmith Karan Kanchan and hip-hop stars Seedhe Maut for a Hindi-English throwdown that proves RANJ and Clifr are the champions of taking Indian hip-hop to new places. – A.T.

2. Prabh Deep, Raftaar – *PRAA*

ONE OF THE best surprises in Indian hip-hop came with the announcement and drop of Raftaar and Prabh Deep's collaborative EP *PRAA*. Across four tracks, one of the most shape-shifting Punjabi artists of our times and a rap frontrunner like Raftaar ran riot without a care for boundaries. The song "TRAP PRAA," however, encapsulates just the kind of sparks that fly on a powerful collaboration like this. Brothers in arms all the way through, *PRAA* shows the might of collaboration in desi hip-hop is one of the best things about the circuit. - A.T.

1. The Arinjoy Trio – *Talkin' That Talk*

KOLKATA BLUES outfit the Arinjoy Trio, follows up their impactful 2019 debut with the four-track EP *Talkin' That Talk*. After navigating pandemic challenges with online gigs, the trio, led by vocalist-guitarist Arinjoy Sarkar, brings a dynamic blend of blues to life. Opening with the tribute to Kirk Fletcher in "Blues For Kirk," the EP explores espionage-themed allure in "Just Your Alibi" and a seven-and-a-half-minute blues ballad, "Now I Think I'm Done." Closing with the funky "Why You Taking So Long," the EP showcases superb musicianship, enriched by organ, strings and horns. - D.B.

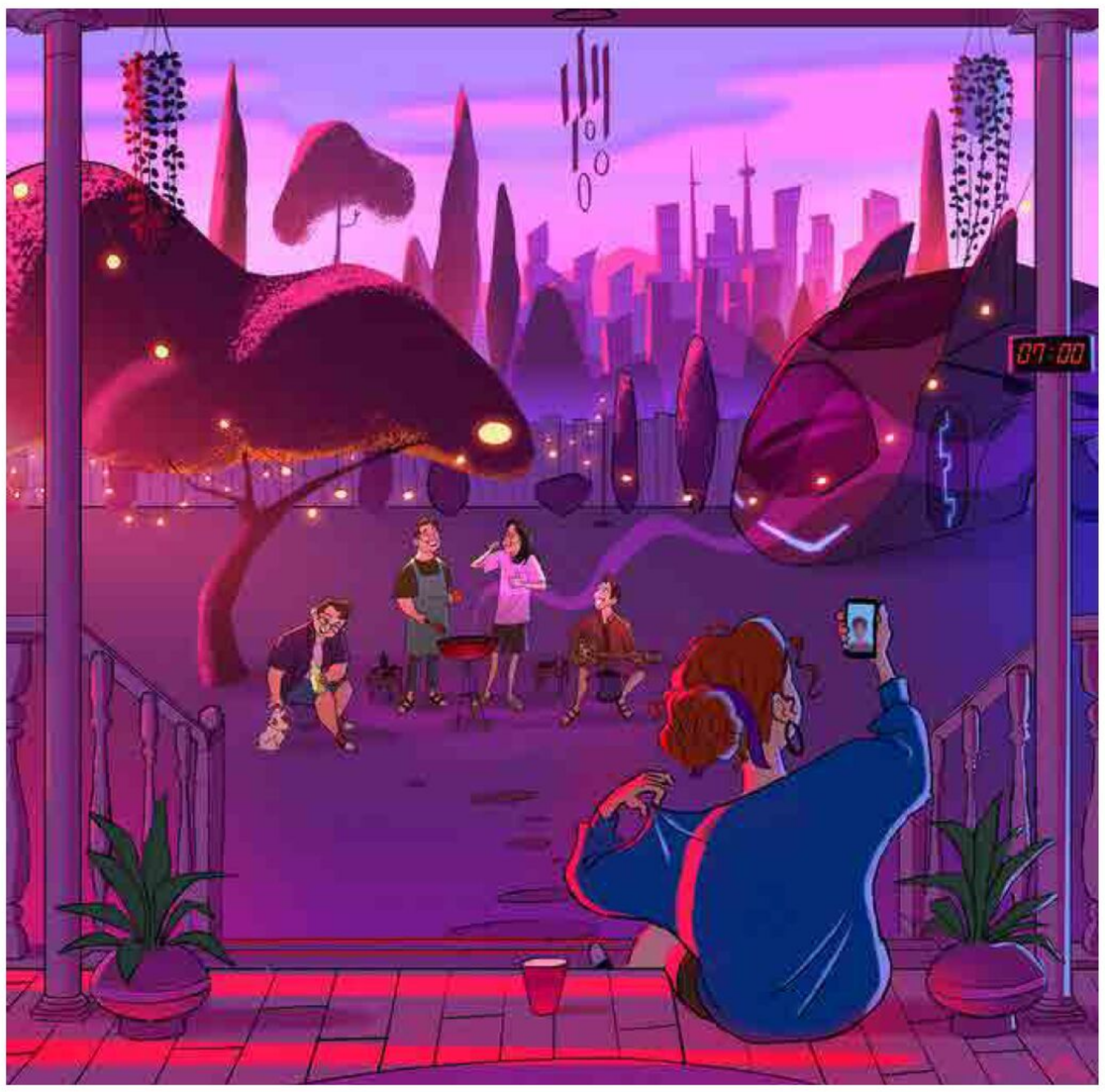
15 Best Indian Singles of 2023

By Anurag Tagat and David Britto

From openhearted struggles put to song by artists like Aarifah to Aditi Ramesh's house-informed bop, a breakout hip-hop love song from Pho and Bhayanak Maut's metal anthem, here are our favorite songs ranked.

Join us as we delve into the standout compositions that have enthralled listeners and set the stage for a remarkable year in Indian music.

15. Trance Effect – *"Blue Sweatshirt"*



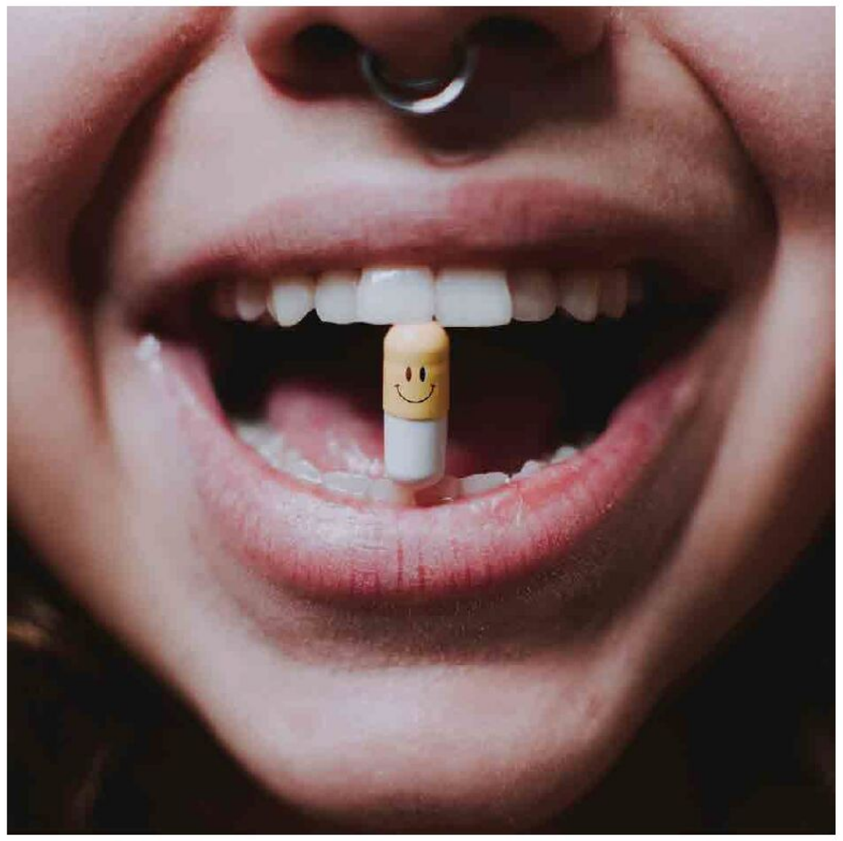
NAGALAND ALT-ROCK band Trance Effect's "Blue Sweatshirt" is a delightful ode to love blossoming during the lockdown. The band maintains its upbeat and spirited sound, reflecting the hope and positivity that emerged amidst the pandemic. The track's straightforward lyrics vividly portray the longing and desire of a couple who found love online during challenging times. - DAVID BRITT

14. Taba Chake – *"Halfway"*

AFTER A FEW YEARS of establishing himself in Indian indie for Hindi songs, Arunachal Pradesh's singer-songwriter Taba Chake returned to writing and releasing English songs with "Halfway." A pensive, prayer-invoking song of inquiry and hope, Chake ticks all the boxes of a charming and straightforward storyteller, perhaps one who's now bound for an international audience as well. — ANURAG TAGAT

13. Sanjeeta Bhattacharya, Prabhtoj Singh – *"X Marks the Spot"*

IN TRYING TO grasp a changing situation in her life—battling chickenpox and feeling unsure about a personal relationship – singer-songwriter Sanjeeta Bhattacharya delivers a powerful vocal and compositional performance on "X Marks the Spot." A collaboration with fellow singer-songwriter Prabhtoj Singh, who produced the song and composed string arrangements, Bhattacharya builds the emotion steadily until she is, in her own words, "unhinged." We always knew Bhattacharya could sing, and this year, she proved her acting chops by acting in the Shah Rukh Khan starrer *Jawan*. Whether on screen or I'm front of a mic, Bhattacharya seems unstoppable. - A.T.



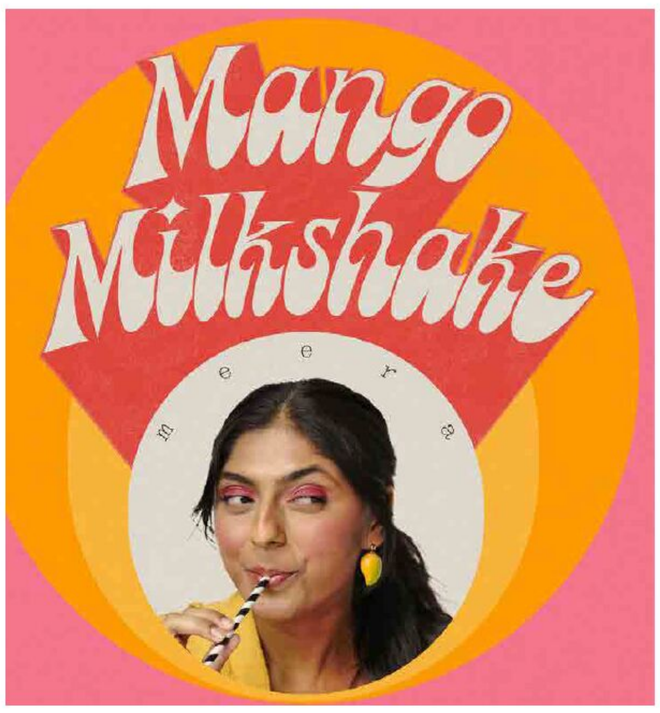
12. The Lightyears Explode – *"Pills"*

MUMBAI'S POP/PUNK duo The Lightyears Explode unleashes a sonic storm with "Pills," the lead single from their just-released sophomore album Suburban Prose. The track melds new pop elements with distorted guitars, dynamic basslines, and a high-octane chorus, a nod to their punk roots. Vocalist-guitarist Saurabh Roy's lyricism delves into personal struggles with anxiety medication during lockdown, adding raw authenticity. - D.B.

11. Tejas – *"Some Kind Of Nothing"*

MUMBAI-BASED singer-songwriter Tejas' single "Some Kind Of Nothing" is a slight departure from his usual polished pop sound. The track delves into vibrant bubblegum landscapes with catchy melodies, slick production and honeyed vocals. Tejas reflects on the pitfalls of social media in his songwriting process, emphasizing the struggle to balance artistry with online demands. - D.B.

10. Meera, Raag Sethi – *"Mango Milkshake"*



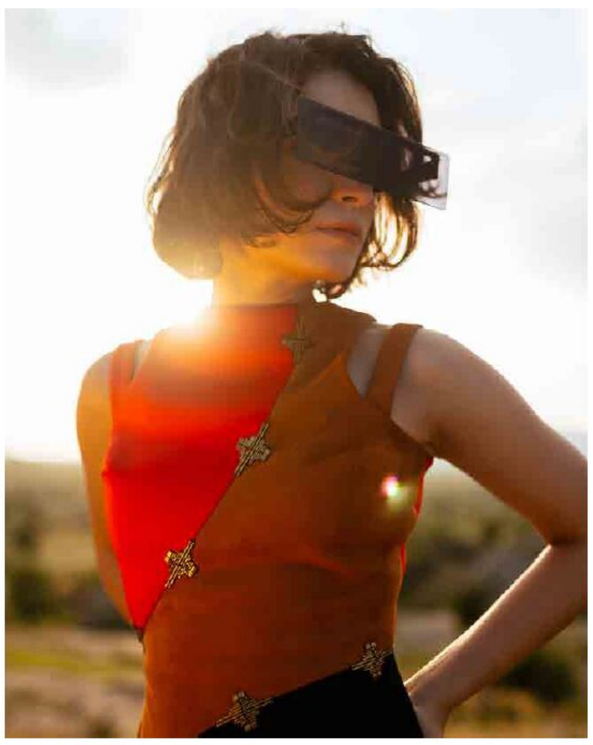
MUMBAI-BASED singer-songwriter Meera and producer Raag Sethi from Ahmedabad's Compass Box Studio offer plenty of freshness with the dancey number "Mango Milkshake." The track, which is the first single off Meera's upcoming EP *Smile-Ability*, leans towards a Bossa nova sound and includes her glossy vocals too. The song is also accompanied by a cutesy music video. – D.B.

9. Bharg, Chaar Diwaari – *"Roshni"*

HOW DO YOU spark a trending reel with choreography and also keep your desi hip-hop cred? Just ask New Delhi artists Bharg and Chaar Diwaari. Taken from Bharg's album *Nikamma*, "Roshni" brings a playful pop-jazz vibe that has an underlying sense of despair to it, which eventually blows up into incendiary metal, complete with shred guitar. If Indian indie needed free-spirited experimentalists, we've found them in this pair. – A.T.

8. Long Distances – *"Lovesong for an Apocalypse"*

MUMBAI INDIE-ROCK outfit Long Distances – comprising vocalist Aarifah Rebello, guitarist-producer Apurv Agrawal, and guitarist-producer Zubin Pastakia, is now out with their sophomore single in the shape of the journeying "Lovesong for an Apocalypse." It has catchy vocals, a groovy bass line, hooky guitar parts, and more, and is off the band's upcoming debut EP *How the Mighty Will Fall*. The group also tapped seasoned Mumbai drummer Jai Row Kavi to sit behind the kit for thetrack, and even worked with bassist-producer Krishna Jhaveri as well as producer Sandunes who provided additional synths to the song. – D.B.



7. Mali – *"Semi Automatic Butane"*

MUMBAI-BASED singer-songwriter Maalavika Manoj aka Mali's angsty synth offering "Semi Automatic Butane" is quite the bop and the track includes a pulsating beat that is layered with lush acoustic and electric guitar parts, synths as well as Mali's honeyed vocals. The song has been produced by Keshav Dhar (from Indo/American rockers Skyharbor) and even features drummer Jehangir Jehangir (of ska outfit The Fanculos) while singer Aria Nanji contributed backing vocals to it. – D.B.

6. Aarifah – *"Anyway"*

MUMBAI-BRED and Pune-based singer-songwriter Aarifah's sophomore single, "Anyway," unfolds as a soulful acoustic indie-rock journey. The artist weaves a narrative of heartbreak, beautifully accompanied by poignant piano, calming vocals, and gentle acoustic guitar strumming. As the song progresses, a delicate interplay of bass, drums, and strings enriches the emotional landscape. Aarifah's introspective lyricism explores the inevitability of heartbreak, finding solace in the realization that every detail led to a poignant connection. "Anyway" is a heartfelt ode to vulnerability, embracing the intricate dance of emotions that accompanies love and loss. – D.B.

5. Bhayanak Maut – *"Just a Metal Kid"*

MUMBAI METAL favorite Bhayanak Maut has always been serious about fun. They carried that energy right into "Just a Metal Kid," an anthem for everyone who grew up over the last two decades with Indian metal as their guiding light. That's a pretty big number of people, even though maybe not all of the fans (or bands) stuck around until today, but BM crafted an epic salute to everyone involved, even bringing in Indus Creed's Uday Benegal for a sublime chorus. – A.T.

4. Pho x Mr Doss – *"Tu Hai"*

NEW DELHI singer-songwriter, rapper and composer Pho aka Akriti Lal, and producer Mr. Doss created one of Desi hip-hop's deepest love songs this year on "Tu Hai." Although Pho has never been one to stick to just hip-hop, her take on obsessive love on "Tu Hai" breaks the clutter in the machismo-heavy Hindi music narratives we've heard all too often. It helps that it has all the makings of a long-term earworm. – A.T.

3. Kamakshi Khanna – *"Breathe"*

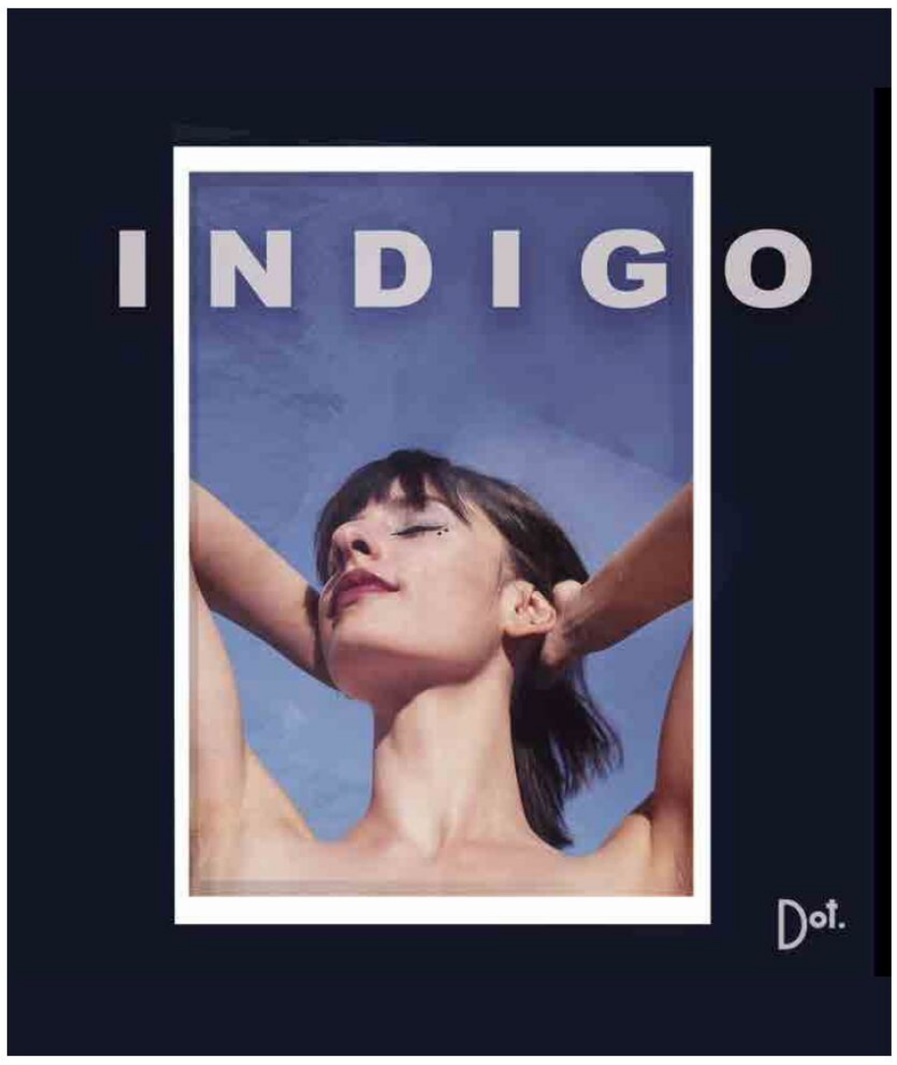
KAMAKSHI KHANNA'S "Breathe" is a poignant journey accompanied by the gentle strums of a ukulele. The New Delhi-born, Mumbai-based singer-songwriter showcases emotive vocals intertwined with a captivating string arrangement, pulsating drums, and a crisp bass groove. The song, a companion through Khanna's personal struggle with self-doubt, showcases her lyrical vulnerability, which is both relatable and cathartic, offering solace to those wrestling with similar inner demons. "Breathe" is a melodic and sincere testament to resilience, providing a musical embrace for anyone navigating the labyrinth of anxious thoughts and self-discovery. – D.B.

2. Aditi Ramesh – *"Filter Coffee"*

WITH THE SOUND of coffee flowing and the vibration of a phone, singer-composer Aditi Ramesh makes her choice of drug on "Filter Coffee." There's plenty of layers in the blend, which is what makes the artist's first release since 2021 a comforting brew – she advocates for time away from social media trends to live in the now, something she's sworn by like she prefers her Indian filter coffee to a cappuccino or Americano. House beats, soul vocals and jazz melodies abound, making "Filter Coffee" a wholesome Indian indie essential tune. – A.T.

1. Dot. – *"Indigo"*

DOT. MIGHT have just started her career in Indian cinema with the Zoya Akhtar-directed comic book adaptation *The Archies* as Ethel, but she's always been ever the wise, measured and graceful singer-songwriter. "Indigo" proves just that, bringing an old-world charm, calming vocals and pillowy percussive work produced by Rich James Roberts to a song that simply tells us to take it slow. Weaving in vocabulary depth while also keeping the message simple is clearly Dot.'s superpower and "Let go" is honestly the kind of advice we can all do with hearing from time to time in our lives. – A.T.



10 Best Indian Music Videos of 2023

From KING's grand introduction to his album 'New Life' and Mali hunting for game to Chaar Diwaari's violent but funny tale and Gauley Bhai's reality check, here are our favorites this year

By Anurag Tagat and David Britto

In 2023, India witnessed a lineup of sensational music videos that stole the spotlight. From catchy tunes to stunning visuals, these videos brought alive the pulse of Indian music.

Let's dive into the realm of sound and visuals as we unveil the top ten music videos that rocked the charts and painted vivid stories across screens nationwide.

10. Chaar Diwaari, Gravity – *"Violence"*

IF WE HAD it our way, there would be multiple Chaar Diwaari music videos in this list, because singer, rapper and producer Garv Taneja is also the director behind his freakishly good singles like "Barood." This year has clearly been Chaar Diwaari's most artistically creative yet in terms of releases and his collaboration with Mumbai rapper Gravity on "Violence" takes the cake. The rappers turn into hot-headed men in pursuit of a woman (whose wedding they later crash) in the hilarious, hectic video that matches the frantic pace of the song. There are cameos from those familiar with the Diwaari universe and New Delhi-bred artists, easter eggs and punches thrown together in the chaos that only Taneja can perfect as an artist and filmmaker, with help from Vaibhav Yadav and Tushar Ronak. - ANURAG TAGAT

9. Chirag Todi, Dot. – *"Spiced Lemonade"*

AHMEDABAD-BASED guitarist and composer Chirag Todi teamed up with New Delhi-bred artist (and actor) Aditi Saigal aka Dot. on the jazz-funk offering "Spiced Lemonade." In the clip for the track – directed by Hawwa – Todi and Dot. are seen performing the song amidst a vibrant atmosphere while actor Santana Roach (whom you may now know as Dot.'s co-star in the Netflix film *The Archies*) also makes appearances on screen as she dances her way through quirky sequences. **– DAVID BRITT**

8. DIVINE, Armani White and Karan Kanchan – *"Baazigar"*

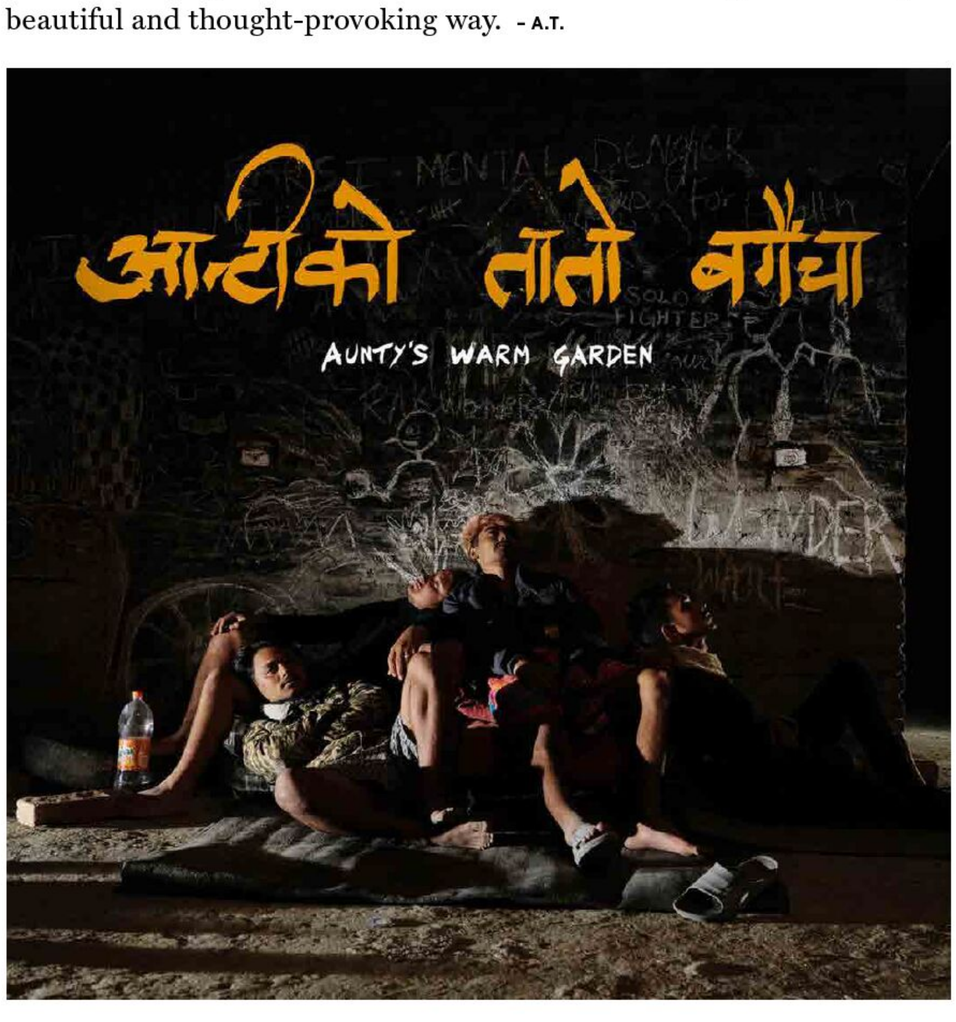
DIVINE'S ALBUM *Gunehgar* has entered desi hip-hop lore already, but special mention goes to the video for "Baazigar," which not only blended Bollywood nostalgia with Indian rap, but took it a level ahead by featuring American MC Armani White. DIVINE – who worked with Karan Kanchan on the song – brings White to his *sheher* for a high-energy visual directed and written by Reema Maya at production house CATNIP. Mob bosses, animation and rap heavyweights combine for a power-packed storytelling treat **- A.T.**

7. Anchit Magee – *"This Is Our Life"*

NOIDA SINGER-SONGWRITER Anchit Magee's delightful music video for his indie-rock track "This Is Our Life," directed by Aditya Rahul, features Chirag Chaturvedi, Tanya Gulati and Harshil Tewatia, embarking on a whimsical journey to combat an alien invasion. Magee's infectious indie-rock sound is complemented by the playful on-screen narrative, blending humor and creativity seamlessly. The light-hearted direction captures the essence of the track. **- D.B.**

6. Gauley Bhai – *"Aunty Ko Tato Bagaicha"*

EXPERIMENTALISTS Gauley Bhai also have a filmmaker in their midst, with vocalist and violinist Veecheet Dhakal directing the video for their Nepali song "Aunty Ko Tato Bagaicha" (Aunt's Warm Garden). With metaphors of hypnosis and intoxication, the visual draws from the reality of the young residents of the Teesta region who are faced with changes in the name of urban development and national integration, as written in the script and storyboard by Angarika G. The Teesta Troupers – a real-life collective of rappers and songwriters – take on roles of friends who head out on an adventure and encounter a monster. Director of photography Eric Chandra Shrestha and the team capture a visual that balances documentary-style observations with full-blown fantasy, in a bizarre, beautiful and thought-provoking way. – A.T.



5. Irfana – *"Sheila Silk"*

KODAIKANAL-BRED rapper Irfana's scorching song "Sheila Silk" came with a striking video which accompanied the song quite well. In the clip, Irfana performs the track while also showcasing her dance skills across a black backdrop. Directed by Sisnu Raj, the video sits perfectly with the impactful beats of the song. – D.B.

4. Hanumankind, Parimal Shais – *"Go To Sleep"*

BENGALURU-BASED rapper Hanumankind is reigning as India's top English hip-hop artist and he started strong early in 2023 with "Go To Sleep," with go-to beatsmith (and fellow Malayali) Parimal Shais. The video too brings in one of his favorite filmmakers, Bijoy Shetty, for a rager of a narrative that pays an abundant homage to the novel *Fight Club* and its movie adaptation. Metaphors for insomnia, artistic ambitions and vulnerability abound in what is a turbulent video that doesn't dial down on the intensity. – A.T.

3. Komorebi – *"I Grew Up"*

DIRECTED BY R. Venkatraman, New Delhi singer-producer Tarana Marwah aka Komorebi's otherworldly clip for her enchanting song "I Grew Up" is a visual treat. Utilizing [3D software] Unreal Engine, the result is a perfect fusion of the tangible and the fantastical. This cutting-edge approach offers a groundbreaking experience that blurs the lines between reality and the unreal. The intersection of technology and creativity elevates the music video to a new level of immersive storytelling, in which Komorebi is seen performing the song in her grand outfits. – D.B.

2. Mali – *"Semi Automatic Butane"*

CHENNAI-BRED and Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Maalavika Manoj aka Mali's video for her angsty synth offering "Semi Automatic Butane" has been directed by Naman Saraiya. Shot at the barren yet striking landscape of Jawai, Rajasthan, in the clip Mali is seen taking on the persona of a badass and driving a jeep through the desert with a toy gun, alongside her bandmate, guitarist Apurv Isaac aka Lala and fellow singer Aria Nanji. - D.B.

1. KING – *"Crown"*

ALBUM INTRODUCTIONS are not the easiest to nail, but KING does it with a fiery intent on "Crown," the intro to his long-anticipated album *New Life*. Bijoy Shetty takes on directing duties, with what seems like a tip of the hat to hip-hop auteurs like Kendrick Lamar in terms of a visual language, but also playing around with cues about KING's past personas and how they're all ended so that he can march on with a new identity, complete with choirs, crowds to hype him up and rock braggadocio. - A.T.

DUA LIPA IS GIVING US EVERYTHING

After a whirlwind couple of years, the wildly ambitious pop star is embracing freedom and fun — both in her life and on her upcoming album. As she kicks off a new era, she lets us into her dreams, her anxieties, and what she wants to stand for

BY BRITTANY SPANOS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL BAILEY GATES

"I AM LITERALLY GETTING THROWN INTO LIFE RIGHT NOW."

Dua Lipa is thinking about her Saturn return as she says this. At 28, she's deep in it now, but the astrology-loving star had been anticipating the foreboding planetary event for a while. It's a cosmic coming of age, usually when people are at the cusp of 30, marked by tons of transitions and transformations and upheaval. Lipa — who's about to start an entirely new chapter in her career — is feeling it all.

"It drags you by your feet," Lipa says in her North London lilt, relishing the chaos a bit. "I thought 28 was going to be so cute."

We're seated on the now-empty patio at Gjelina, a popular restaurant on Venice Beach's trendy Abbot Kinney Boulevard. (She sheepishly admits that her love for the show Californication made her want to see this street before she ever visited Los Angeles.) Lipa pulled up to lunch alone, weaving through once-packed tables in her tweed car coat, T-shirt, jeans, and sunglasses. Her hair, dyed a deep, mulled-wine red, makes her stick out immediately — which might be why the owner, who knows her dad and is also of Albanian descent, sends over a free dessert. "Albanians everywhere," she says with a shrug.

She's slightly jet-lagged, having landed from London a few days earlier. Two days before her flight, she released her new single, "Houdini," a neo-psychedelic dance-floor rager. The next morning, Grammy nominations were announced, and she found out her Barbie hit, "Dance the Night," was up for two awards, including Song of the Year. "I didn't even know they were coming out that day!" she says. She celebrated by going to her friend's DJ set, and admits she was kind of hungover for her flight.

But in between such big moments and celebrations, Lipa has been figuring out a lot about herself. Her highly anticipated third album is due later this year, and it captures a period of major changes in her life, including the end of a relationship and her forays into dating. She also parted ways with the management firm that represented her for a decade and bought back the rights to her music. Beyond that, she's been planting seeds and piling up projects that include her Service95 newsletter, movie roles, and a production company, plotting out exactly what she wants to do in the future.

"I'm being thrown into learning lessons of resilience," she says, "lessons of maybe not having to be so strong all the time and being OK with that." She searches for the words a bit. "I don't know.... I'm learning so much about myself."

Lipa may have already been more resilient than she realized. Look no further than her origin story: At 15, she famously persuaded her family to let her leave Kosovo and moved back to London, where she was born, completely alone. She finished school, passed her A-levels, and began waiting tables and modeling while seeking out a team and label to get her music career off the ground. Before she turned 20, she was signed.

In the years leading up to and following the release of her 2017 self-titled debut, Lipa hustled in the studio and on the road, playing festivals and opening for Troye Sivan, Bruno Mars, and Coldplay. The work paid off with hits like "New Rules" and a Best New Artist Grammy Award. Then, in 2020, her hyper-glam disco revival Future Nostalgia became a pandemic blockbuster that climbed the charts and launched her into main-pop-girl territory.

The album was a rebel yell for Lipa. It became an unlikely soundtrack for millions of people during lockdown, and made disco a ubiquitous trend in pop for the next few years. And with her warm, soulful voice, mixed with her undeniable self-assuredness, Lipa became the pop diva ready to meet an uncertain moment.

While she's one of the most-streamed artists in the world, she's also your favorite rock star's favorite pop star: When Elton John isn't calling her up for lavish dinners, Mick Jagger is busting a move with her at his Christmas party. "We had a full dance party, dancing with Mick Jagger in his living room," she says, laughing. She breaks into a light impression of Jagger: "He's like, 'All right, babe! Let's go, darling!'"

Last summer, Trent Reznor said that he found "Levitating" so "well-crafted" it made him tear up. ("That was too, too cool," Lipa says, smiling widely.) Recently, for her Service95 book club, Lipa spoke to Patti Smith, one of her heroes. Smith shared that she had seen a picture of Lipa in a chain-mail dress at the Barbie premiere and instantly thought of Joan of Arc. "Sometimes when I'm talking about things like this, I'm like, 'It feels weird that I am even talking about myself,'" Lipa says.

Lipa is everywhere, but many critics feel they have barely cracked the surface of who she is. She slipped so easily between genres that her sound, and personality, came off as inscrutable earlier in her career. Glimpses into her life outside of the spotlight would come in frequent but well-curated waves on her Instagram, the only social platform she runs herself. For her, music is a job — and her personal life remains just that. "I like to just live my life, do my photo dump, write my songs, and dip," she explains. "I'm not interested in trying to be controversial or do something for a reaction."

Her poise and disinterest in drama often leads people to cast her as a guarded, too-perfect pop bot. Jokes and criticism that she's not trying hard enough, not giving enough, have hurt her. In the middle of all this self-discovery, Lipa's been figuring out how to create more distance from the noise around her.

"It's always so easy with social media to get caught up in a negative spiral or people being mean, telling you what they think about you without really knowing you at all. It's already so far-fetched, maybe, for some people to think that you have feelings or that you get upset," she says. "For me, I think it's just important to be able to take things with a pinch of salt."

As unfazed as she may seem, some comments do sting. Take the reactions to something as innocuous as Lipa kicking back on vacation. After her Future Nostalgia tour wrapped in November 2022, Lipa spent the beginning of 2023 traveling the world with her family and friends. Fans dubbed her the "vacanza queen," commenting about how she's never home since her Instagram feed was full of photo dumps from places like Cannes and Ibiza.

"I think people are quick to forget," she says. "I was on tour up until the end of December. I felt like I missed out on so much time with my family and friends. It shows how short our attention span is, which is why music comes out so much faster."

And then for just a second, she bristles slightly, exhausted by how something so harmless has been

getting picked apart. "Of course, I was going to fucking holiday and chill [during] the year that I was just going in the studio and had some time off. As long as I'm doing my job, hitting my deadlines, and getting my shit done, then I will find a way to relax, too. It's really work hard and play hard. Why not?"

Lipa is working hard now. Her fans are eagerly awaiting her third album, which they've nicknamed DL3. She isn't quite ready to reveal the actual title, but she shares that it's a psychedelic-pop-infused tribute to U.K. rave culture. It's heavily inspired by acts like Primal Scream and Massive Attack, staples for a London girl with a penchant for late-night drives around her city. Even her aesthetic is a total 180 from her last era, toning down the glam, sparkly bodysuits in an effort to evoke the "don't give a fuckness" of Brit-pop acts like Oasis and Blur, more touchstones for her new music.

"This record feels a bit more raw," she says. "I want to capture the essence of youth and freedom and having fun and just letting things happen, whether it's good or bad. You can't change it. You just have to roll with the punches of whatever's happening in your life."

But Dua is still Dua, and she hasn't lost any of the command and drive that's brought her this far, even with her Saturn return serving up new lessons every day. There's a ton she's planning right now, and she's going to give her fans everything, even while taking things in stride. "I'm trying to move with a lightness, like 'nothing is the end of the world,'" she says. "Whatever happens is exactly the way it's supposed to be."

JUST A WEEK EARLIER, before our lunch date in L.A., Lipa was at home in London. It was November, and the city was characteristically dreary, the sky gray and the streets dusted with intermittent rain. From the outside, her house looks like a foreboding, industrial-style warehouse, locked down, gated, and brick-walled. She settled down here in December 2022 and lives near her childhood home and teenage haunts — she fondly points out that there's a club nearby where she saw J. Cole's first U.K. tour.

Walking into her house feels a little like stepping from a black-and-white landscape into full Technicolor: It might seem like a fortress from the outside, but like Lipa, the interior is sophisticated and inviting, full of thoughtfully curated decorations and cozy furniture fit for the numerous dinner parties she hosts here. Oversize orange and white couches surround heavy granite coffee tables. Against one wall is a walnut cabinet accented with tchotchkes and a copy of Patti Smith's M Train. A giant color wheel looms over her white record player, while on the same wall hangs a collage of the Muppets painted by the art collective FriendsWithYou. On the bench below, a crate of records has an Oasis bootleg perched at the front, alongside a few artfully placed vintage books that include William A. Emboden's history of hallucinogenic botanicals, Narcotic Plants, and the screenplay for Paris, Texas.

Lipa is wrapping up a meeting with her team in another part of the house, but within minutes, she walks into the living room. She is in the middle of a promotional blitz that includes radio appearances, photo shoots, and social media content. Though she's dressed down in jeans and a Palace Unitas sweatshirt, her eyes are done up in a heavy, smoked-out cat eye from an on-camera appearance that morning. Her red hair is down, except for two tiny, face-framing braids.

Lipa began working on new music in 2021, long before her Future Nostalgia tour started. At the time, it was still unclear if there would even be a tour, given all of the pandemic-related delays and health concerns. "I was like, 'I might as well get back in the studio and start working on a new project.' And for me, I just have to write a lot until I get my idea."

The album didn't take shape until after the second leg of her yearlong tour was over. The exact date — maybe it was June? Lipa's brow furrows as she tries to remember, and because she needs to be precise, she jumps off the orange couch we're sitting on and walks toward the seemingly normal, white brick wall next to us. It turns out it's actually a secret doorway to her bedroom.

"It's so heavy," she groans, struggling to pry it open. But she returns holding a thick notebook that she purchased from CVS that's covered in abstract, absent-minded Dua doodles. The pages are filled with notes and handwritten lyrics, and she flips to the date in question — July 2022 — which is when she first met Tame Impala's Kevin Parker. "I was so nervous because I'm just such a fan of Kevin's," Lipa says.

Parker, she remembers, "was quite shy in the beginning." She invited him to a session with three other people she had been working with that summer: her longtime collaborator Caroline Ailin, who co-wrote "Don't Start Now" and "New Rules," electronica auteur Danny L Harle (Caroline Polachek, Charli XCX), and folky-pop balladeer Tobias Jesso Jr. (Adele, Niall Horan). Putting these four disparate musical personalities together was a risky gamble that paid off.

"After a while, we all just loosened up together," Lipa recalls. By the end of the first day at London's 5DB, the group had "a really good" song. By the end of the week, they had three. "I remember thinking it was a genius move to get that combination of people together," Parker says. "Like, hats off to her."

Lipa refers to this particular group as her "band"; they ended up making eight of the 11 tracks on the album. Outside of Ailin, everyone was mostly new to her. She admits that she had been apprehensive about letting new people into her orbit: "As things get bigger, you get more scared to open up and be vulnerable and sit down in a room and just speak from the heart," she says.

Part of that might be because Lipa was sorting out a bunch of stuff in her personal life — boundaries, breaks, balance. In December 2021, right as she was entering tour rehearsals, the tabloids reported her breakup with model Anwar Hadid (the brother of Bella and Gigi Hadid), who she dated for two years. She spent the following year tiptoeing back into single life. "Dating, I think overall, is just a little confusing," she says, which is somehow both comforting and terrifying to hear from someone even Margot Robbie has said she has a crush on. "It's either through friends of friends or people you trust where you can meet new people, because [dating] is not really so straightforward when you are, I guess, a public person." (Lipa started a new relationship last year, but confirms she's single again on a call in December.)

According to Ailin, they "always started with the truth." Lipa would arrive to sessions with Ailin, Harle, Jesso, and Parker, armed with stories from the night before, chronicling the often-ridiculous ride that is dating in your mid-twenties.

The final product is uniquely and utterly Dua Lipa: confident dance pop full of witty Instagram-caption-ready one-liners. A lot of the songs are playful scenes from clubs or nights out with friends; the lyrics toggle from warnings that she'll make a fast escape to optimism about what a first kiss could become. There are no sweeping ballads, though there is one good ballad fake-out that blooms into a more buoyant Carole King- and Fleetwood Mac-inspired moment. Mostly, this album is straightforward pop bliss, not unlike her approach to Future Nostalgia.

Lipa doesn't talk about her love life in depth. People will have to look to the music to get a sense of her private thoughts: One song juxtaposes light harmonies with a tumultuous portrait of a relationship coming to an end: "We call it love but hate it here/Did we really mean it when we said forever?" she sings. But another highlight — one of Lipa's favorites on the record — is all about maturity and healing. The dreamy, midtempo track plays out like an updated take on Gwen Stefani's "Cool." In the lyrics, she compliments her ex's new relationship, calling his new girlfriend "really pretty," and she finds peace as he moves on: "I must have loved you more than I ever knew.... I'm not mad/I'm not hurt/You got everything you deserve."

"When you have a feeling like that one, you feel really grown because you're like, 'Oh, whoa, I'm such an evolved human being that I can see my ex move on and feel good about it,'" she explains. For Lipa, writing about letting go without animosity was a new experience: "I think I've had breakups in my life where I felt like the only kind of breakup you could have was when things just ended really badly," she says. "Things ending in a nice way was such a new thing.... It taught me a lot."

For the sound on the album, she thought back to British club culture and the type of carefree abandon she feels when she's on the dance floor. Lipa's collaborators helped unlock that energy: She met Harle at "the afterparty of an afterparty of a show" through Andrew Wyatt, who co-wrote Lipa's first single, "New Love," as well as her Barbie hit. Wyatt and Harle had done stuff for Polachek, who opened for Lipa's tour. They'd also worked with a less-expected collaborator that piqued Lipa's interest: former Oasis singer Liam Gallagher. On Gallagher's album, Harle was credited as a "rave consultant" responsible for the breakbeat element on the 2022 cut "I'm Free," which he co-produced with Wyatt.

"Dua really enjoyed that," Harle says. "Dua likes going to a rave." (This is true: "I love being on the dance floor, and being the first on the dance floor if nobody else is dancing," Lipa says.)

Other inspirations came from Lipa's upbringing in London: The mixes that played late in the evening on Radio 1 were a huge guide; that's where she first heard some of her favorite Primal Scream remixes, which eventually led her to their 1991 LP, Screamadelica. And in addition to Oasis and Blur, she found herself turning to more of the Nineties rock and electronica acts she grew up listening to, like Moby and Gorillaz.

I mention that some of those Brit-pop influences — Noel Gallagher and Damon Albarn in particular — haven't always been very kind to female pop artists (both have taken shots at the likes of Adele and Taylor Swift, for example). I ask her if she's ever met any of them.

"FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE, I THROW MYSELF INTO SOMETHING SO HEAVILY TO GET IT RIGHT AND TO MAKE IT PERFECT."

"I haven't had any encounters with them, actually," she says. "Sometimes you have to separate the art from the person.... It's more like the music element, the aspect of it that I'm really connected to. The way that [some Brit-pop artists] acted, the things that they've done, they're obnoxious for sure. That's their whole thing."

They seem to represent a certain version of toxic rock masculinity, I say, and Lipa agrees, pondering what the world expected from rock stars in the past. "There's so much toxicity in the way people wanted their artists or their musicians," she says. "If they weren't like that, they would've been seen as boring, and I think that's such a bad way to see things."

As raw and loose as the album sounds, Lipa's process was painstakingly detailed. The collaborators call Lipa a "meticulous" editor who rewrote every line until she felt it was perfect. "Her editing is brutal," Parker says. The lead single, "Houdini," for example, took months to get right. "I'd kind of recoil in horror and go, 'Oh, no, it's a great verse!'" Parker says. "But then an hour later, we'd have something that I can't imagine not being in the song."

"I don't think there's a single song on this record that I didn't go back and want to rewrite and perfect and change and work on it a bit more and dig a little deeper and see if we could go any further," Lipa admits. But her method worked: Every single one of the collaborators raves about the chemistry and the cohesiveness Lipa engineered.

"Everyone was going, 'Is this normal? This feels too good to be true,'" Jesso says. "It's the pinnacle of my writing career. There's nothing you could get better than that."

The truth is, you can't be as ambitious and precise as Lipa is without giving a fuck. "I really care about how the fans respond," she says. (After "Houdini" was released, she was frustrated that people said it still sounded "disco" when none of her influences come from there.)

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't care about what the critics thought.... When you put your heart and soul into something, you want people collectively to be like, 'Oh, it's changed sonically, and it's been something different.'"

She's noticed a pattern with all of her singles so far, how they don't start at the top and "gradually grow" over time. "They take so long and never get to Number One, but they stay around for a long time," she says. There's no irritation or anger in her voice when she says this; while a Number One in the U.S. would be nice, the longevity feels like a hard-earned win.

"As long as the songs stick around and people are listening to them, I'm cool with that," she says.

When it's time to leave, London is a darker shade of gray. Lipa walks me to the door, holding open my jacket for me to stick my arms into. She tells me about her dinner plans at BRAT, a Michelin-star restaurant in Shoreditch where she's meeting up with a primary-school friend. After she recommends the negroni at the restaurant where I'm heading to meet friends, the gates close behind me. Like she promised, the negroni is delicious.

LIPA CAN TRACE her meticulous nature back to when she was a child. As a kid, she ran a blog called Dua Daily, a Service95 prototype where she would share her style tips and recipes. And as the oldest of three, she's taken her job as a big sister as seriously as she has taken her gigs as both tastemaker and pop superstar. Her siblings were in school when Lipa's career started taking off, and are now forging their own paths; her sister wants to be an actress, while her brother is producing music.

"It's cool to just see them have their goals," she says, grinning proudly. "I'd be like, 'Oh, you guys want to come over?' And they're like, 'Oh, no, I'm busy. I've got a studio session.'" Lipa sees their parents, Anesa and Dukagjin, as her blueprint: Anesa had been studying to be a lawyer and Dukagjin was both a musician and a dentist in Kosovo before they fled their homes in the early Nineties when the Bosnian war broke out. The couple completely started over in the U.K., where their three kids were born.

"My parents are really the people I look back on for everything," she says. "While I was a kid, they never made me feel like anything was ever wrong. They know they tried to give me as normal of a childhood as they could, while at the same time just working so hard, and working in bars, and restaurants, and pubs, and all that."

When Lipa was 11, her family moved back to Kosovo's capital city, Pristina, after the war. It felt like heaven to Lipa, who got to stay out a little bit later and move more independently in the city's streets, which, she says, were much safer than London's.

School was harder, though. "It was so much more advanced than in London," she says, her eyes widening from the memory. Science, chemistry, and math were particularly tough. "The kids were learning shit that I thought I had time to learn. I was doing fractions in London, and algebra in Kosovo."

Luckily, Lipa seems to like a challenge. She would make bets with her mom, like one where she could get her belly button pierced if she got an A in math. She got a tutor and, eventually, her piercing.

"Maybe I thrive on being undermined, or maybe I thrive on people saying that I can't do things," she says. "For better or for worse, I throw myself into something so heavily to get it right and to make it perfect, make it good."

Earlier in her career, her low-key demeanor was interpreted as a lack of personality onstage. The "Go girl, give us nothing" meme took off around 2018 after it was left as a comment on a video of Lipa looking either bored or tired while doing a lackluster hip-swiveling dance move. It's something Lipa brings up during our interview, once without being prompted and another time after being pressed about how much it seems to have stuck with her.

"I did find that really hurtful, and I found it really painful because I was like, 'I'm finally getting to do something that I love to do, and I'm being shut down, that I just can't seem to do anything right,'" she says. "Not only that, but I was also being thrown around the world. Lots of promos, lots of rehearsing, lots of everything, and not having really time to perfect anything."

Lipa began rolling out "Houdini" on Instagram by playing with the illusionist theme of the song's namesake, posting then deleting teaser photos until announcing the track's release date. She also wiped away her past few years of Future Nostalgia and trips around the globe on the app. But, perhaps unwittingly, the theme played into ideas of Lipa as a slippery, hard-to-pin-down pop star: A viral thread on X posted a week after "Houdini" was released described her as a "mystery," with indiscernible personality traits. "She's everywhere and nowhere," read a follow-up post.

Lipa gets frustrated with the connotation, especially since it's trailed her for a while now. "I think I'm British," she offers. "I don't think I'm here to spill my guts on a talk show because it's going to be good for a news cycle or getting attention.... As much as people think they know the people they support, I actually don't think they know anything about them anyway."

Most of the time, Lipa makes her business moves in silence. That's why her fans were shocked when she quietly parted ways with her TaP management team in 2022. A friend of hers helped set up Lipa with TaP CEO Ben Mawson in 2013, when she was just a teenager waiting tables in London. After news broke that Lipa was leaving TaP, she signed on her father as her manager, flipping the way most management shake-ups usually go in pop music.

"To be really quite honest, I can't talk so much about the whole thing," Lipa says, mentioning the litigious nature of the situation. (She says there was a settlement that allowed her to buy back the publishing rights to her music; a TaP spokesperson confirms that Lipa bought her publishing in 2023, a year after their management relationship ended.) Still, the experience reaffirmed how important it is for her to be as well-versed on the business side as she is with the creative elements of her career. "The creative side is the way that I express myself, but I think being able to also understand that this is my name, this is what I stand for, these are the things that are important to me, and how that actually goes hand in hand with the artistry nowadays."

She offers a warning to younger artists: "Pay attention early on, especially in the business side of things.... I don't think enough people tell young artists that. Everything feels so exciting in the beginning, and of course it is, but it's good to have the knowledge, and good to take care of yourself."

"THEY DON'T WANT YOU TO BE POLITICAL. THEY DON'T WANT YOU TO BE SMART. .. THERE IS SO MUCH MORE TO ME THAN JUST WHAT I DO."

Lipa brings up "knowledge" often. She understands the way the general public looks at her and other female pop stars, refusing to believe that they are more than their looks or their hits.

"I don't know if people believe that I like to read books, or people believe that these conversations are my own," she says. She seems a little resigned — frustrated, even — at how limiting that perception can feel. "I think it's a thing of what people want from their pop stars," she says. "They don't want you to be political. They don't want you to be smart. Not that I'm trying to prove myself in that way, but there is so much more to me than just what I do."

Lipa points back to the experiences of her parents and how it has shaped her worldview. "My existence is kind of political, the fact that I lived in London because my parents left from the war." She doesn't break eye contact as she says this, serious in her tone. "I feel for people who have to leave their home. From my experience of being in Kosovo and understanding what war does, no one really wants to leave their home. They do it for protection, to save their family, to look after the people around them, that kind of thing, for a better life. So I feel close to it."

Lipa has found it hard to stay silent on many issues, especially those that feel similar to what her parents experienced during the war. That's why she has long been an outspoken advocate for the Palestinian people. But in 2021, The New York Times ran a full-page ad from Rabbi Shmuley Boteach and the World Values Network accusing Lipa and the Hadid sisters of antisemitism for their support of Palestinian liberation. Lipa took to social media to condemn the organization's accusations — as well as the paper for running the ad. A year later, she invited former Times editor Dean Baquet on her podcast and asked him directly how the paper could publish something "so damaging and potentially dangerous."

"Speaking to an editor was important for me because I felt like I was put in danger and I was put in a place where my core values were completely flipped on its head, and that really hurt because I feel like when I do want to speak about something, I hope that people will see it for what it is and that there is no malicious intent," she says now.

More recently, she's signed and supported a petition for a cease-fire to the Israel-Hamas war that has torn Gaza to shreds and displaced millions.

"My feelings on displaced people [are] very real and raw, and it is a difficult subject to speak about because it's so divisive," she says. There's a somber shift as she carefully gathers her thoughts. "But there is a world where you can feel for all lives that are being lost. And I have to say this: I don't condone what Hamas is doing, regardless of what [that advertisement in] The New York Times said [in 2021]. Every life is precious."

As she continues, she points out how important it is for people to properly educate themselves on the crisis, especially in the face of rampant misinformation.

"I feel so bad for every Israeli life lost and what happened on Oct. 7," she says. "At the moment, what we have to look at is how many lives have been lost in Gaza, and the innocent civilians, and the lives that are just being lost. There are just not enough world leaders that are taking a stand and speaking up about the humanitarian crisis that's happening, the humanitarian cease-fire that has to happen."

Like many, Lipa feels powerless in the face of the ongoing conflict. Her solution remains being as informed as possible while using her platform to encourage her fans to do the same.

"It's probably easier to be apolitical," she says. "I think there's no kind of deep discussion about war and oppression. It just is something that we've seen happen time and time again. I feel like just being a musician and posting about something doesn't make enough of a difference, but hopefully, just showing solidarity, which is sometimes all you feel like you can do, is important."

"DO YOU SMOKE?" Lipa asks, standing on the private balcony of her suite at the Chateau Marmont. She brings over two Parliaments, lamenting that the hotel doesn't have her usual Marlboro Lights; in the new year, Lipa will announce that she's quitting smoking altogether. She sits down carefully in the structured, leather Jacquemus dress she has on for the night. (It's a lot easier to maneuver in than the dress she wears to the Golden Globes in January; she posted a video of herself struggling to sit in her tightly corseted custom Schiaparelli gown after the show.) She strikes a match and lights both cigarettes while staring out at the sea of billboards on Sunset Boulevard.

Lipa likes coming to Chateau when she's out in Los Angeles, with its spooky vibe and the chance of running into people she knows downstairs at the exclusive, celebrity-filled restaurant.

"If these walls could talk, I wonder what the fuck they would say," she says before taking a drag of her cigarette. Above the quiet hum of the traffic below, she talks about the ghost stories she's heard about this place. "I wouldn't go into Bungalow Three," she says, referring to where John Belushi died. Her paranormal curiosity is reserved for the secret tunnels that she's heard about beneath Harry Houdini's estate in Laurel Canyon. We'll be heading there soon for the second of three "Houdini" fan events she's hosting.

Back inside her suite, her glam team is going through racks of designer clothes, organizing what they can. In two days, Lipa will jet off to Tokyo for another fan event, then return to Los Angeles for Barbie promos ahead of award season. In between, she'll go back to London, then to New York a couple of times, and even fit in a girls' trip to Copenhagen. She'll end the year in India with her family, a quick break before she begins volleying herself across the world again for more of the same.

Though her career as a singer is the priority, she wonders if there's a future where her path changes, comparing pop stardom to "a hamster wheel."

"You make the album, you promote it, you go on tour, you do the same thing, and that's so amazing, but I think there's going to come a point where maybe I want to take just a little bit longer [in between]," she confesses. "I have all these other things that I can also do that really interest me."

Lipa established her own production, publishing, and management company, Radical22, with which she's making her passion projects come to life. This includes a documentary on her beloved London neighborhood of Camden that she's executive-producing with Disney+. She's been enjoying the process of booking interviews with artists like Little Simz, who will appear in the doc, and other names associated with the area's music and arts scene.

Following her cameo as Mermaid Barbie in Barbie, she will play a suave spy in Matthew Vaughn's comedy Argylle, which comes out this year. "It was a lot of fun, but a massive learning curve," she admits. "I remember when Matthew reached out for me to do a part in this, I [thought] I should go and do some acting lessons." Vaughn persuaded her not to, hoping she'd just be herself on camera. "If she was nervous, she hid it well," Vaughn says. He sought out the star after seeing her don a sparkly fringe Valentino dress on The Graham Norton Show. ("It sort of looked like a Christmas decoration with legs and arms," he says. "She looked amazing.")

There's other stuff Lipa wants to accomplish: She could see herself moving outside of the U.K. one day, maybe to Barcelona, or Madrid, or Paris, or Mexico City. She's been learning Spanish and French; by 35, she wants to be more fluent in both, as well as Italian. "I want to know all of them," she says. "I get so jealous when people are speaking in French, or Spanish, or Italian, and I'm like, 'Fuck.' I just want to respond. I think I can pick them up fairly easily because of Albanian, although it's quite different."

She's started to pick up guitar, recently learning "Knockin' on Heaven's Door." Maybe in a few years, she'll take some college courses, too. "I started working so young that I just feel like there's going to be a little moment where I do some more sharpening of my knives," she says.

Before long, it's time for her to head to the Houdini Estate, where fans are taking advantage of the open bar, free tacos, and dance floor. Lipa makes a grand entrance, descending a spiral staircase and joining the DJ behind the booth. She dances and sings along to two spins of "Houdini," grabbing people's phones to take a few selfies and videos.

She comes and goes as quickly as promised. She jumps into one of three Escalades transporting her crew around the city. Once she's in the car, she climbs out of the window to give me a hug goodbye. Then she's off, heading back toward the Chateau and its ghosts — and wherever else the night takes her.

FRESH INDIE PICKS

Hear new releases from independent acts

***By* David Britto**

Kayan – *"plenty"*

In a refreshing turn, Mumbai singer Kayan's newest offering is the melancholic and heartfelt "plenty." With emotional lyrics that sit upon delicate guitar work, the song hits home before it opens up towards the end for a euphoric finish. In a statement, Kayan said, "'plenty feels like a song I've been wanting to write for a long time. It comes from a very real space, real experience and real feelings that I've poured out into what's a fresh sound for me as an artist too. It encapsulates the bittersweet symphony of maturity, reflecting the inevitable evolution of relationships. It's about acknowledging the richness gained in letting go."

Corner Café Chronicles – *"Paradise Drive"*

Mumbai electro-rockers Corner Café Chronicles' newest offering comes in the shape of the dreamy instrumental number entitled "Paradise Drive." The track includes a variety of dynamics as well as lush yet gritty soundscapes. In a statement, the band said, "The track is inspired from late night monsoon drives across Mumbai."

Sanjana B – *"Relentless"*

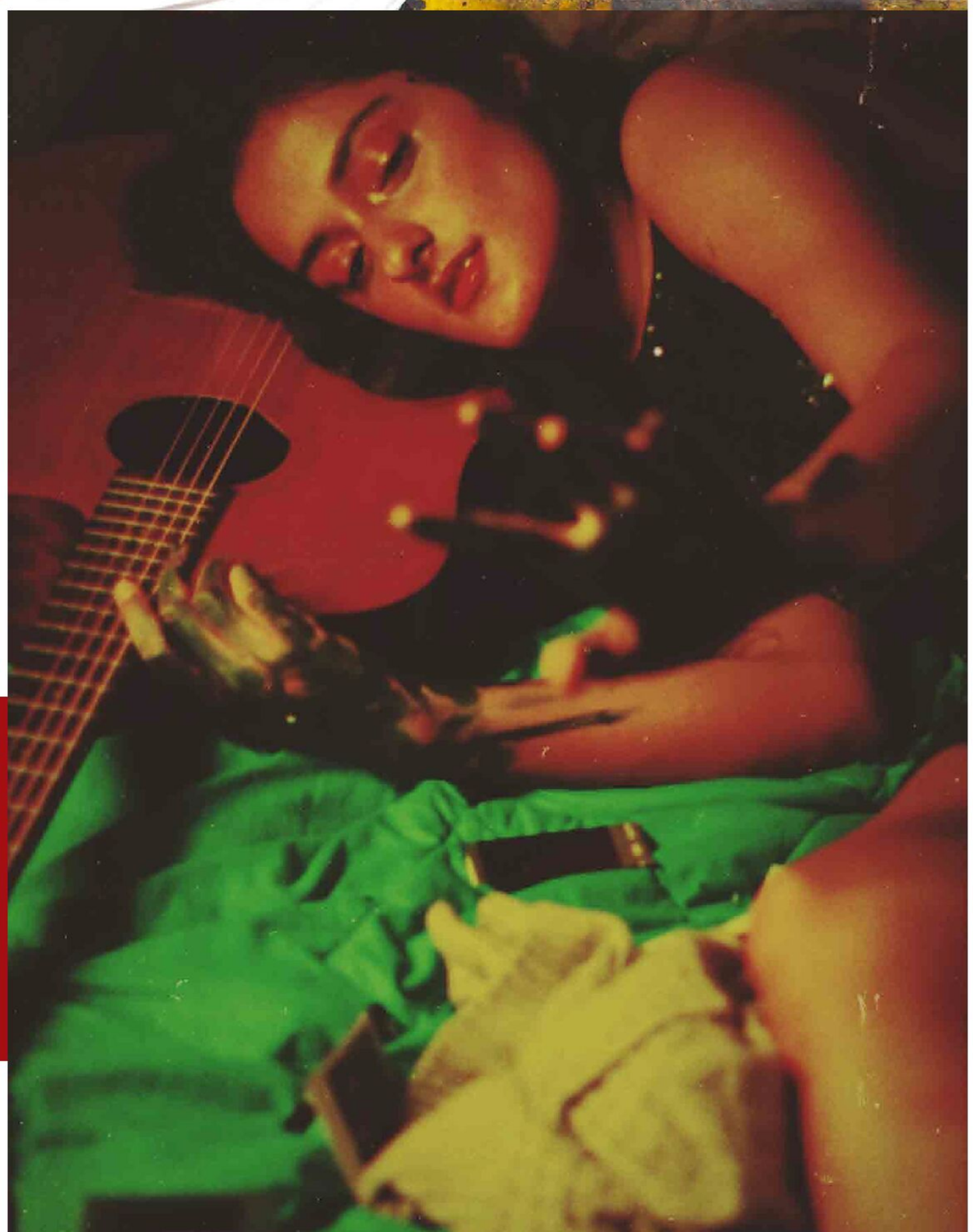
Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Sanjana B's latest single is the electro-pop offering "Relentless." The song features catchy hooks, vibrant synths, a dancey groove as well as Sanjana's velvety vocals. In a statement, the artist said, "'Relentless' is about our greed and our relentless desire for more than what we have. It talks about how we become more and more vulnerable in our endless chase."

Swara – *limbo*

Bengaluru pop/R&B singer-songwriter Swara is now out with her four-track debut EP entitled *limbo*. The record oozes with a certain freshness in terms of its production while Swara's honeyed vocals sit perfectly across the EP. In a statement, Swara said, "I don't believe in there being only yes or no options because there always is an in-between or an answer outside the norm... but since we're so used to finding comfort in 'stability' and 'closure' it's just difficult for most people to accept that taking time and being confused is so, so normal. That's what I'm doing with this EP – letting them know that it's okay to not be okay."

Shweta Srivastava – *"Kahan Hoon Main"*

Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Shweta Srivastava's new single and her first Hindi track is the melancholic "Kahan Hoon Main." With poignant piano parts as well as a delicate pop beat, Srivastava croons beautifully on the song. In a statement, the artist said, "'Kahan Hoon Main' is a reminder to believe in the rhythm of your dreams. It encapsulates the essence of the quote, "You are where you are meant to be" and is a reflective encouragement to have faith in the calling of the heart."



MEHR – *"I Fell in Love with You in September"*

New Delhi singer-songwriter MEHR's latest offering is the indie-rock track "I Fell in Love with You in September." The song features emotive lyrics juxtaposed with dreamy and upbeat production. In a statement, MEHR said, "It [the song] beautifully captures the ephemeral essence of summer love as it transitions into the reflective mood of autumn."

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; AKSHAYKUMAR KALE (SIMETRI)

Bluestackface – *"The Design"*

Mumbai blues-rockers Bluestackface are out with a new single from their forthcoming album in the shape of the riff-heavy "The Design." The track includes crunchy distorted guitars, pulsating bass parts as well as driving drums. With gritty vocals too, the band offers plenty on this five-and-a-half-minute banger, which comes with a playthrough music video too.

Simetri – *All About You*

Mumbai sibling pop duo Simetri recently put out a two-track EP entitled *All About You*. The songs on the record, "Still Falling For You" and "Love Being With You," have been produced by Yohanan D'Souza and feature a vintage pop sound while Simetri showcases their sublime vocals that stand out on the EP.

PAVITHRA CHARI:

'I FEEL BLESSED TO BE ABLE TO HAVE MULTIPLE CREATIVE OUTLETS WHERE I CAN CHALLENGE MYSELF'

THE NEW DELHI ARTIST TALKS ABOUT WORKING WITH A. R. RAHMAN, NEW SHADOW AND LIGHT MATERIAL AND MORE

***By* David Britto**

IN A CAPTIVATING intersection of talent and musical exploration, New Delhi artist Pavithra Chari emerges as a dynamic force, leaving an indelible mark on the contemporary music scene. From working with composer A. R. Rahman, Pavithra has seamlessly blended tradition and innovation, creating a unique sonic landscape. As a key member of the Anirudh Varma Collective, she has toured across the U.S., enchanting audiences with her ethereal vocals and electrifying stage presence. Beyond her collaborative endeavors, Pavithra is also set to unveil new material with her duo Shadow And Light alongside Anindo Bose, promising a fresh sonic experience that transcends boundaries. Read our interview with Chari below.

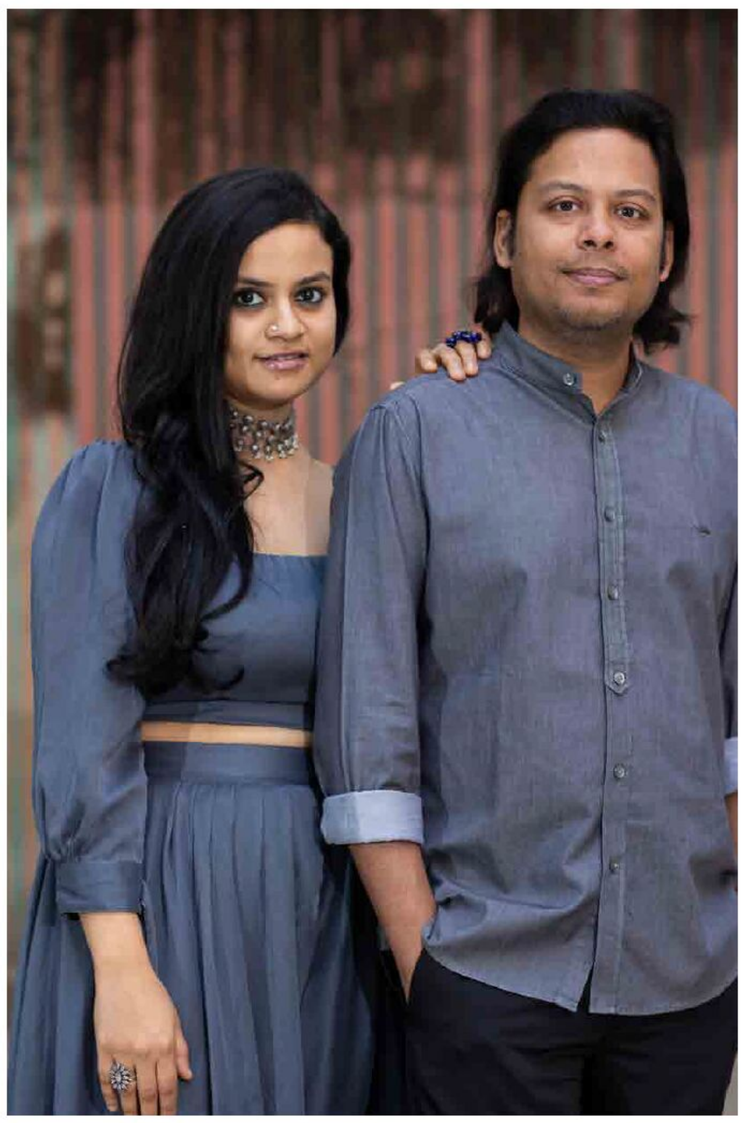
You've had a whirlwind of a year, if you had to sum it up, how would you describe 2023 for yourself?

2023 has been a year of great exploration for me. It has been a whirlwind of opportunities, challenges, collaboration and I have thoroughly enjoyed it, every step of the way. I have found the space and scope to express many new artistic identities of myself. I debuted as a composer, worked on a dance production as a performer, and toured with multiple performance outfits of varied genres. Exploring music in films has been an exhilarating journey and I have discovered so many layers to my vocal versatility and capacity. I have also worked with incredible composers like D.Imman, Santhosh Narayanan,

SOUMITRA THAKUR

“I feel blessed to be able to have multiple creative outlets where I can challenge myself, push out of my comfort zone and discover new interests and areas of exploration.”

Darbuka Siva, Ofro and Reva whose music I have greatly admired. For me, 2023 has set the momentum for a great 2024.



Tell me what it was like to work with A.R. Rahman — how’s he like to be around and how do you prepare for a session with him?

I am so proud to be a part of Rahman sir’s musical universe. He has been an artist I have looked up to since I can remember. When I got the call, I really didn’t know what or how to prepare, I just went in with an open and curious mind, ready to give it my best. And the entire process of working with him, understanding the composition, taking his feedback, and delivering the song – all of it will be etched in my mind forever. He was so wonderful and warm in the studio, and I remember just being in awe of his compositional process, how he built the song from scratch. From singing it at the session, to listening to the final version before release, and performing it at the audio launch – has been one of the biggest highlights of 2023 and ‘Utchanthala’ will forever be a song I will be proud of.

In terms of contributing to films and OTTs, are the approaches different going into either or do they sort of have a similar approach?

In terms of the musical components, I would say the process is pretty similar. When singing for visual media, I have come to understand that the music is an important but still a smaller part of the much larger production which involves so many other elements. This has been a great change in my perspective from being a classical musician or an indie artist where the music has always been the most significant part of the creation and performance process. I’ve been a part of some truly wonderful OTT projects in 2023, and even got to debut a Carnatic rendition for Made in Heaven season 2. All of these experiences gave me the chance to sing for a variety of themes, narratives and situations, many of which I may not have ever thought of exploring as a songwriter.

What was the tour like with Anirudh Varma across the U.S., what are some memories from it that you can share?

I have been one of the vocalists in the Anirudh Varma Collective since its inception in 2018. The USA tour was exciting and taxing in equal measure, and as touring indie artists, we are always prepared for anything when we are on the road. I got the opportunity to perform in cities I hadn’t been to in my previous USA tour with Shadow and Light – including Portland, L.A., Houston and Dallas. We had many memorable performances this time, including UCLA, Alberta Abbey, JLF Colorado and I was excited to explore different compositions that I sang for the first time in the collective. I have seen so much growth in each musician in the band over the last five years. Beyond the performances, I got the opportunity to nurture genuine friendships with my bandmates and have countless memories to cherish from our travels.

‘Chitrahaar live’ is quite an interesting concept – talk to me about it evolved into what it is now.

‘Chitrahaar live’ began as an Instagram series during the pandemic that has now evolved into a live performance outfit. I have tried to highlight a strong sense of nostalgia through the music and aesthetics of the project. The production

RISHI ROY

involves recreating my living room on stage, and sharing personal memories I have associated with each song that I perform. The response I have received from the audience both in person and online has been heartwarming. It is so much fun to perform on stage, with everybody vibing to the songs, dancing and having a great time. I am looking forward to expanding it further in 2024, and bringing it to new listeners across the globe.

Shadow and Light has kept you on your toes too – a busy India tour that went by, what were those shows like and what can you tell me about the upcoming UK tour?

Though we didn't release new music this year, Anindo and I got the opportunity to work on an incredible collaboration called Damaru. It was an Indo-UK dance production which we composed for and performed, commissioned by Serendipity Arts Foundation and Sampad Arts Foundation, UK. Conceptually it was something unique and open to multiple interpretations. We created the piece with wonderful dancers Shyam Dattani and Nilava Sen, and premiered the production through an India tour in December. It was a new experience for us to write for dance, and I was excited to not just perform as a singer, but also lend in a bit of my experience as a dancer on stage. I am looking forward to expanding this aspect in my future projects whenever possible. We are planning to take Damaru to more cities in India as well as the UK in 2024, and will release details about it very soon!

As an artist involved in multiple projects, how do you balance it all?

It takes a lot of focus, attention to detail and multiple lists to keep things on track. I feel blessed to be able to have multiple creative outlets where I can challenge myself, push out of my comfort zone and discover new interests and areas of exploration. There is a different kind of growth for me in each of these identities, and they all help me develop an immense sense of self-awareness. I sometimes feel like I can switch from one project to the other when I need a change of pace, but such a process also brings with it the risk of burnout. So as of 2023, I have begun to focus on prioritising my mental health, valuing rest and finding the joy in everything I do. 2023 has been a very stressful but a blessed year and I am truly grateful to each and every person who made it memorable for me.

What's next?

I have multiple releases scheduled for 2024, starting with some playback projects in Tamil, Hindi and Telugu and new releases as Shadow and Light with Anindo, as we celebrate 11 years of writing music together. I am also exploring my craft in a way that helps me level up, while constantly challenging myself and putting myself in new situations. I am looking forward to composing more for films and contributing to interdisciplinary collaborations. And I am excited to travel more in 2024, hopefully through my work and music. Though I take pride in being a meticulous planner I am also reminding myself to take things as they come in the new year, and I hope to always remain grounded and grateful for growth.

ARYAMAN DIXIT

DANCING IN THE DESERT AT MAGNETIC FIELDS

Anticipation, Music, Friendship, And Pursue Seltzer Setting The Stage For An Unforgettable Journey

***By* Nimisha Elizabeth Dean**

HAVING ALREADY experienced the chaos of Magnetic Fields a few years prior, this time I approached the festival with more maturity, wisdom, and better preparation. I made sure to pack essentials like spray-on sunscreen, gloves for the sudden temperature drop at midnight, and earbuds to drown out the continuous music.

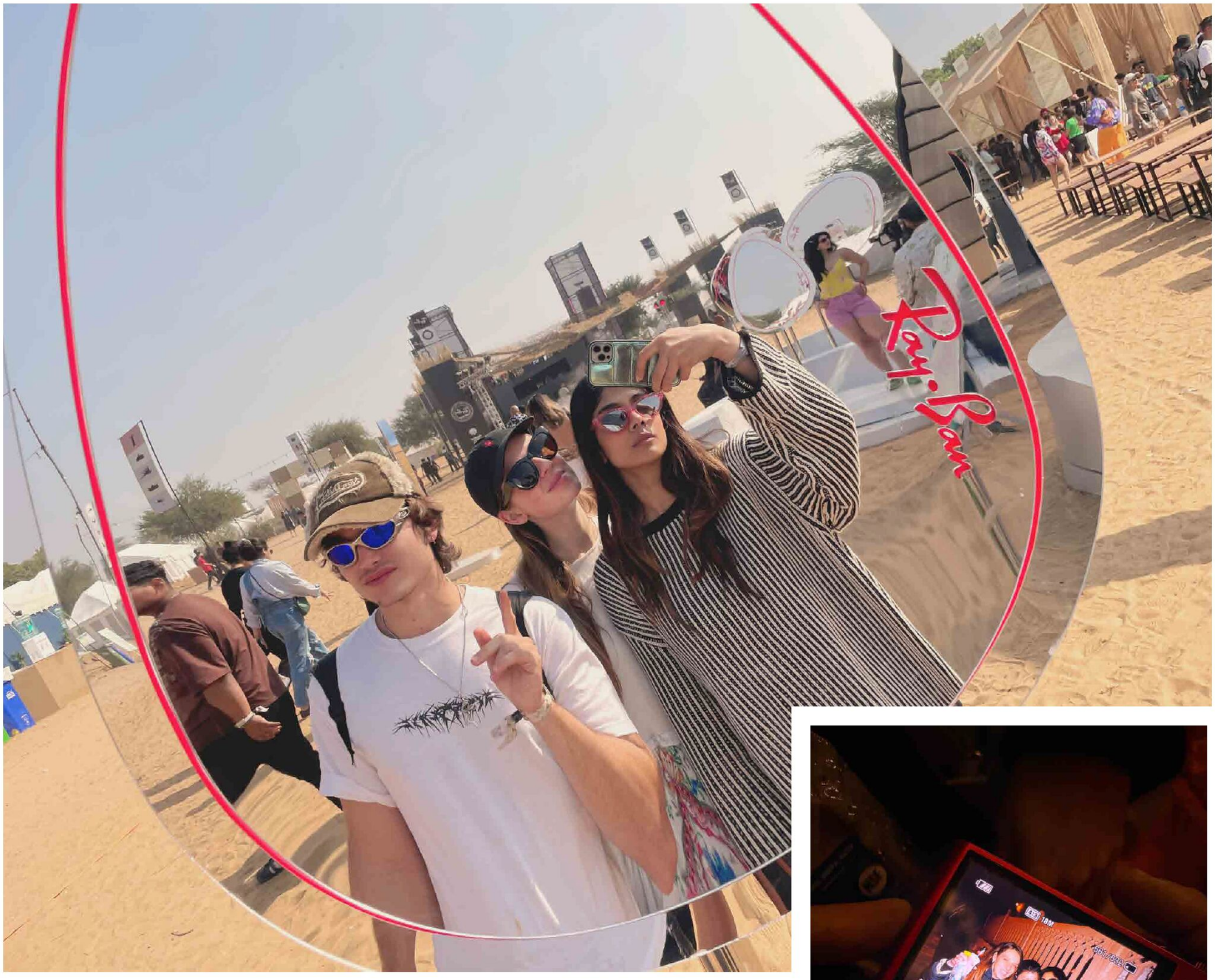
On a Friday morning, I left for Jaipur, where I met up with a friend to share a cab to Alsisar Mahal, the expansive 10-acre venue for the three-day music festival. The three-hour drive from Jaipur to Alsisar felt like a dream, with us eagerly discussing our plans for the weekend and making pit stops to indulge in junk food (no judgment, we were in vacation mode). It seemed almost too perfect.

Reality hit when we arrived at the festival entrance and I realized I had lost my phone. Panic set in, especially since we were now in sandy terrain. With the help of kind bystanders, I managed to locate my phone within half an hour, vibrating under a guard's foot. What a way to start the adventure.

After this unexpected hiccup, I made my way to my tent, reminiscent of my previous festival experience. Hastily unpacking, selecting an outfit, and grabbing a Pursue drink to sip on while doing my makeup, I finally felt ready to explore and embrace all that the first night had in store.

At the Pursue Cosmic Disco tent, I noticed Anisha Parwani was keeping the party alive and kicking. Both of us being from Mumbai, I had previously seen Parwani perform at various clubs in the city. However, it struck me that, despite this being my second time at the festival, it was the first occasion I was witnessing friends take charge behind the decks. Suddenly, the weekend held a deeper significance.

Accompanied by my friend Nicole from Switzerland, we explored the stalls selling clothes and accessories. Recognizing the unique appeal and aesthetic of Magnetic Fields, most of the brands showcased were dedicated to sustainability, veganism, and eco-friendliness.



After acquiring two new sweaters, we dropped our purchases off at our tent before venturing out for the remainder of the night.

Time seemed to slip away rapidly in the midst of enjoyment, and there's no better place to experience this phenomenon than on the dunes of Rajasthan. The sight of Alsisar at night was enchanting, with the palace illuminated by lights that occasionally moved, creating captivating patterns on the walls. Despite the chill in the air, friends suggested changing into more suitable attire, but I remained adamant—I was determined to wear a skirt on my first night there. The rest of the night unfolded seamlessly, with dancing, indulging in one too many Pursue drinks, and intermittent stops at food stalls that stayed open around the clock. When I finally returned to my tent, I bundled up with two pairs of pants, a substantial sweatshirt, gloves, and a snug hat.

The jolt of waking up in the warmth of the sunlight was surprising. Drenched in sweat, the transition from night to day felt extreme. It seemed as if the tent had trapped the intense heat inside, but a brief walk outside convinced me to stay in bed until sunset.

Once the air ceased feeling like it could scorch us alive, Nicole and I returned to the Pursue Cosmic Disco tent to catch our friend Suhas Mellow from Mysore in action. Two hours passed in the blink of an eye, with everyone joyfully laughing, dancing, and making plans for the remainder of our festival experience. Hand in hand with Soo, a DJ from Korea making her Magnetic Fields debut, I hurried backstage to witness Sandunes perform from the cozy vantage point of standing on the sidelines, soaking in their music.

On the third and final day, I wisely refrained from stirring until the sun had set. After curling my hair for the third and last time that weekend, I walked over to watch Jitwam, a British artist of Assamese origin, play with his band. Later, my friends and I swayed to the tunes as Dualist Enquiry unveiled his new album, captivating the audience. The visual backdrop featured an artful drone shot capturing all of Alsisar.

Attending Magnetic Fields for the second time solidified a theory I had—that they've discovered a formula that works and intend to stick with it. Four years ago, the tents, stalls, and even the stages were nearly identical. If it's not broken, why fix it? People from all corners of the globe travel to experience these three days in the desert, and Anish Shetty, the founder and CEO of Pursue, has tapped into something that people crave—a light, refreshing alternative to beer and whiskey.

POP STUFF: DEATH BECOMES US

On the 61st NYFF and a 2023 that brought a strange bounty of death at the movies

By **Soleil Nathwani**

SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

DEATH IS THE LAST TABOO. From our early childhoods, religion, history classes or the passing of an aging grandparent conjure flights of angels, scenes of war or the memory of papery skin in a casket or on a pyre, but rarely do we actually discuss the reality. Former soldiers, often conscripted without regard for their morals, are left to fumble through the PTSD of post-war memories. When a family member has a long, lingering illness hushed rooms become the norm and a child's untimely death can be met with deafeningly quiet

Poor Things

Maestro

condolences. Suicide, the biggest taboo within the taboo, remains largely shrouded in the hyper-silence of shame – unspoken despite the fact that more people take their own lives every year than die from car crashes. Paradoxically, we've made the things that leave the deepest scar the hardest experiences to share. Death is our only guarantee in life and yet it is the thing we won't discuss around the dinner table, until we're forced to confront it, like people groping in the dark.

Art shines a light in this darkness and while there's no shortage of music, literature and painting that grapple with the truth of death and allow contemplation, cinema lags behind, tip toeing gingerly around real depictions of death and going whole hog into their caricatures. The movies have brought us bloodshed as sport à la *Terminator* and *Kill Bill*, war epics from *Lawrence of Arabia* to *1917*, ghouls and horror galore from *Carrie* to *Midsommar* to *Get Out*. And who hasn't seen a biopic that captures the death of a great figure in a single frame while exalting or dissecting their life for a solid two hours, as if we too will spend most of our lives living and next to none of it dying. As a visual collective medium, and one that walks the line between art and entertainment, films have responded to our need to consume vitality, not process dying. We come to films to exalt in screen idols who defy aging and when we do confront death in the movies, it's often at such a remove from real life experience that we can walk out of the dark and say it was just a movie. But it's possible that a collective on-screen contemplation of death's depths could feel as healing as reading Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* or as moving as viewing Picasso's *Guernica* solo in a museum. This past year the movies seem to have come around to that idea and brought a strange bounty of death in film. My most enriching movie watching experiences from the 61st New York Film Festival, a year's worth of films in a fortnight in October, grappled with death again and again and in ways that felt as honest as they were creative, shocking and moving. In prior years a singular film might confront death or aging this way. Dementia in Gaspar Noe's harrowing *Vortex*, elder love in Michael Haneke's devastating *Amour* and genocide in Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing*, all spring to mind. But 2023 brought a surfeit, and staring down the inevitable at the movies came with its own catharsis.

Take Bradley Cooper's Leonard Bernstein biopic Maestro in which he directed himself in the titular role. Despite the early drama over whether his prosthetic nose was a little much, the image that lingered for me was the always excellent Carey Mulligan as Bernstein's long suffering wife Felicia Montealegre Bernstein, an actor and passionate activist. Cooper, who co-wrote the film with Josh Singer, tilted the focus away from Bernstein's prodigious career and towards his marriage, a call that paid off. After exploring the power balance of artistic couples in *A Star is Born*, Cooper seems to be making the subject a theme of his directing life. In *Maestro*, although it's Bernstein's career that overshadows his wife's, the real destabilizer is neither Bernstein's talent, nor his closeted homosexuality, but Felicia's illness. The movie's beating heart becomes Felicia's struggle to survive a cancer diagnosis and the mark of that on her husband. We see her shrink on the screen – the jewelry, the fabulous clothes, the coiffed hair giving way to muted sweats and a skull cap. As Felicia recedes into, and finds comfort in, her children and once fraught marriage, Cooper really lingers on her final days. When Leonard Bernstein holds his wife's frail frame, we ask ourselves – who will we hold and who will hold us?

Conversely, in *Oppenheimer*, the year's other much talked about biopic, Christopher Nolan expands on J. Robert Oppenheimer's life, while not doing as much to capture the many deaths that spiraled out of his work. The film exemplifies Nolan's great skill as a writer-director in revealing the physicist known as 'the father of the atomic bomb', but glosses over the dark core of his work's complicated legacy where it concerns the bomb's real victims. The horrific deaths in Nagasaki and Hiroshima receive short shrift.

NETFLIX

Zone of Interest

Poor Things

The Settlers Dir.
Felipe Galvez

Nolan might have done well to take a page out of the books of Jonathan Glazer's *Zone of Interest* – for which Glazer took the Grand Prix prize at the Cannes Films Festival, or Felipe Galvez Haberle's remarkable Spanish language debut *The Settlers*. Both NYFF selections are historical dramas of a sort that revisit what it means to confront the killing of a people. Glazer and Haberle push us to re-examine the history of war by shifting our gaze in oppositional but equally affecting ways.

Zone of Interest, drawn from a novel of the same name by Martin Amis, makes us squirm as we take in the domestic sphere of Rudolph Höss (Christian Friedel), commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp. As we observe Höss's wife (Sandra Hüller) and five children in an idyllic house adjacent to the camp, consumed respectively with the blossoming vegetable garden and playing in the bucolic fields, we take in the horror of what it means to hear gunshots in the distance. The question Glazer raises, of engaging in the banalities of living whilst committing genocide, is further amplified because of what he so deftly and uncomfortably implies about our own complicity as observers in other wars. What is not seen takes on seismic meaning well before Glazer cuts to the haunting final frames of real-life janitors cleaning the museum that now stands at the former camp site; the vitrines that encase shoes of the thousands of dead now scream bloody murder at us.

The Settlers similarly uses arresting imagery whilst playing with narrative convention to tell a story of the Selk'nam genocide in which the Ona natives of the Tierra Del Fuego archipelago were wiped out. Santiago-born director Haberle takes us to 1901 and the southernmost tip of the Americas where the unhewn and gorgeous landscapes make us feel like we are at the end of the earth, not the beginning of a century. Here a ruthless Chilean landowner hires a Scottish officer of the British Army (Mark Stanley) and a Texan mercenary (Benjamin Westfall) to establish a trade route for his livestock across the Atlantic, and instructs them to slaughter any indigenous people along the way. A mixed-race guide Segundo (Camilo Arancibia) is plucked off a chain gang to accompany them and this is the film's wild card.

We sit with Segundo's discomfiting experience as the lowest order of the power structure. We watch his enforced silences and the violence he perpetrates to save himself. Haberle's characters, worthy of a John Ford movie turned on its head, form a revisionist history that is truer to the spirit of the oppressor and the oppressed, the colonizer and the colonized, than many epic war dramas. When the film shifts perspective in its final act and we move forward many years to reporters who find Segundo and record him as the last of a tribe, we already know him. We understand how posed images and crafted documents of historical record cannot grasp colonialism's slaughters with the complexity they deserve, and we question all the history text books we may have read.

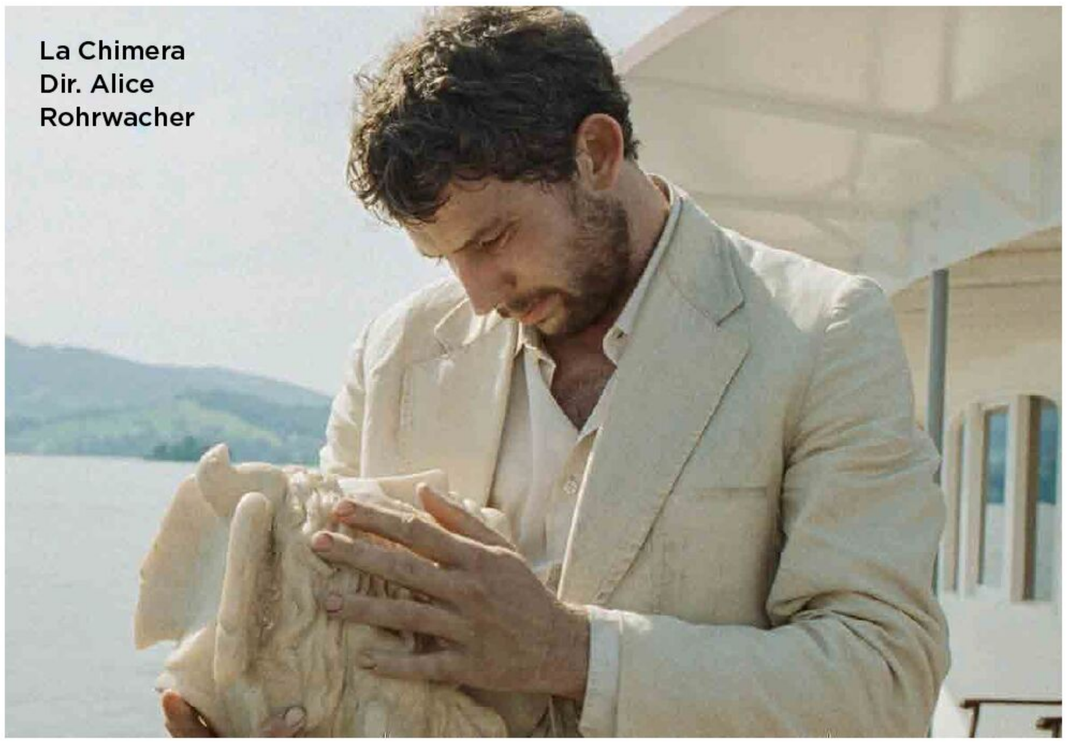
Scorsese's Killers of the Flower Moon, the long-awaited Western drama starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Robert De Niro and Lily Gladstone, aims at something similar in the North American context. Set in 1920s Oklahoma, the meticulously researched big-budget film, based on the book by David Grann, is indeed a worthy epic. But where its retelling of murders of tribal members of the Osage Nation succeeds as storytelling, it somehow falls short of the truths that *Zone of Interest* and *The Settlers* approach in their final acts by drawing a through line from the exposition of a genocide to the inadequacy of its present-day vestiges.

The erasure of ancestry and bloodline summon ever more mystical questions about death that other NYFF selections probed. What rules govern some lives and not others, and what if we changed them? If death is not eternal, what does rebirth look like? Where does memory and legacy fit in all of this?

The films that tackled these questions stayed with me long past their running times and came from some of my favorite filmmakers.

A24; SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

The Beast


La Chimera
Dir. Alice
Rohrwacher

Greek filmmaker Yorgos Lanthimos' *Poor Things* is the rare film that is uproarious while being an intellectual exercise, thanks to a wonderful script adapted by Australian writer-producer Tony McNamara from Alasdair Gray's novel of the same name. Lanthimos and McNamara are collaborators, who, as seen with their Oscar-winning film *The Favourite*, have long stewed in reinterpreting women's subjugation and power. *Poor Things* is also Lanthimos' take on *Frankenstein* and he leans into feminism and fantasy in a way that I bet would have tickled Mary Shelley. We meet a jerky young woman Bella (Emma Stone in her edgiest incarnation) and learn that her corpse has been reanimated by scientist Goodwin Baxter (an endearingly scalpel-wielding Willem Dafoe). Goodwin has performed this miracle by replacing Bella's brain with that of a fetus. The zany energy of the film comes from the premise that Bella-reborn is a Victorian-era woman on the outside, with the mind of a guileless but brilliant child absorbing the world anew.

Free from the psychological rule book that her sex has learned to abide by, when Bella is romanced by the huckster Duncan Wedderburn (Mark Ruffulo, hilarious as a rakish dandy) she promptly sets out with her new lover on a voyage across the world. Bella is as an avid explorer as Columbus or Magellan but her big questions are void of predilections to capitalism, colonialism and especially, patriarchy. Why must she eat, dance, use money, exert power or have sex a certain way, Bella wants to know, earnest as a toddler with a puzzle. Stone, as the soul of the movie, makes the daunting task of playing a mash-up of woman-child-zombie-suffragette appear wildly graceful. The question at the movie's core is iniquity and *Poor Things* has found a way to pose it that makes our rules appear as ludicrous to us as to this incarnation of Bella.

Reincarnation and possibilities after death are also at the core of French director Bertrand Bonello's *The Beast* and Italian director Alice Rohrwacher's *La Chimera*. Both romantic dramas have more than a touch of the magical about them, tilting to sci-fi in Bonello's film and imbued with an ineffable dream-like quality in Rohrwacher's.

The Beast imagines the same couple reborn, unbeknownst to them, over three time periods. Gabrielle (Léa Seydoux) and Louis (George MacKay) shape shift through an illicit love affair in belle époque Paris, a predatory relationship between incel and aspiring actor in contemporary Los Angeles, and a future where both love and trauma can be erased. *La Chimera* centers on a former archeological scholar, Englishman Arthur (Josh O'Connor), who has just been released from prison and goes search of his dead love Beniamina in 1980s Tuscany. Arthur is driven to use his penchant for being able to sniff out buried Etruscan antiquities to rejoin his love in another world.

Both films require patience, but their directors are so skilled with their material, it feels inconsequential that we don't know always know where we're going. *The Beast* and *La Chimera* keeping us guessing to the very end when their wrenching but sublime aha moments allude to the wonder of a life lived, and lived again. Bonello and Rohrwacher expertly tease the notion that love is the real antiquity, a treasure that can live on.

The wonder of a life lived is explored in another NYFF selection, *The Taste of Things*. Not since 2014's *Cloud of Sils Maria* have I seen the fantastic Juliette Binoche inhabit a role so entirely. As the title suggests, this is a movie about food and the way it inspires memory. Vietnamese filmmaker Tran Anh Hung, who won Best Director at Cannes for this sensuous film, casts Binoche as Eugénie, cook for two decades to renowned gourmet Dodin Bouffant (Benoît Magimel). In real life, the two actors were once partners and this might have something to do with their incredible on-screen chemistry. The pair make entire worlds pass in a glance as they prepare lavish meals in a rustic nineteenth century kitchen.

Under Hung's direction, cinematographer Jonathan Ricquebourg's camera caresses vegetables that are brought in from the garden

CAROLE BETHUEL

The Taste of Things

and turned to silky broth in copper pots as large as bathtubs. He lingers as meats are made tender, and builds anticipation as pastries are baked to perfection. This is slow cooking and slow romance that takes a dramatic turn when Eugénie becomes ill and Dodin begins to cook for her. We are reminded that food can be decadent, but at its core it is sustenance, healing and life.

When Eugénie can no longer cook for Dodin, Dodin finds that his real quest is not in crafting and consuming the perfect meal but in finding someone who can conjure the precise flavours and textures of Eugénie's cooking because that is where sense memory lies. Eugénie's legacy is in the touch of her hand, the way she stirs a pot and knows just when an ingredient is enough. It is in the way her cooking evokes emotion and Hung is getting at what makes legacy most powerful; the ability to move others. Dondin's savior is the gastronomic prodigy Pauline (Bonnie Chagneau-Ravoire), one of Eugénie's assistants. A child of enormous potential and intuitive taste buds, Pauline can carry this legacy, making the The *Taste of Things* one of several NYFF selections that sees death make way for life through the prism of the next generation.

Numerous other films in the past year's lineup are similarly concerned with inheritance. Michael Mann's blockbuster Ferrari serves up Adam Driver as sports car magnate Enzo *Ferrari*, marked by the death of one son and preoccupied with bringing another into the fold. Ryusuke Hamaguchi's Venice Film Festival Grand Jury Prize winner *Evil Does Not Exist* poses the question of humanity living symbiotically with nature by narrowing the focus to one small village and one child. Hayao Miyazaki's latest animated fantasy *The Boy and the Heron* has taken both box office and critics by storm in a tale of a boy processing the death of his mother. The film is one of remarkable sensitivity, presenting complex issues of conflict and grief through the eyes of a child amongst a fleet of birds and beasts. Indeed, eighty-three-year-old Miyazaki came out of retirement to work on the film and has called it a way of saying goodbye to his grandson. Meanwhile, the documentary *Ryuichi Sakamoto: Opus* elegizes one of the great musician's last performances as a tribute from son to father. The film features Sakamoto alone at his piano performing a carefully curated farewell set piece at a time when he was unable to travel to audiences as he battled cancer. Neo Sora (Sakamoto's son) filmed in dramatic black and white emphasizing both the contrast of piano keys and of living and dying.

Monster

Sakamoto composed nearly fifty film scores in his lifetime and his last was for one of the year's most haunting movies – *Monster* from another great Japanese artist, Hirokazu Kore-eda. Sakamoto died in 2023 weeks before the film's release and Kore-eda fittingly dedicated his film, about the friendship between two young boys, (Soya Kurokawa as Minato and Hinata Hiiragi as Yori) to Sakamoto's memory.

Monster's script which was written by Yuji Sakamoto (no relation) was the screenplay winner at Cannes, and is a masterclass in shifting perspectives. A story which appears to be about classroom bullying is revealed to be about an entire society's prejudices. The two boys' friendship can only flourish in an abandoned tram car in the midst of a forest away from

CAROLE BETHUEL; SUENAGO MAKOTO

Anatomy of A Fall Dir. Justine Triet

All of Us Strangers

agitated parents and teachers. The unanswered question of the film is whether these boys can survive and thrive in an environment that opposes them for a multitude of reasons. *Monster* hints at the possibility that life can be so stacked against some that happiness only feels possible outside of its limits.

And what when people become so certain of this that death feels like their only choice? Even when death by suicide does occur in films, it is rarely the true subject of them. All too often when suicide is depicted in film, it exists to serve up melodrama or facilitate plot. We are too afraid or ashamed of the idea to spend two hours navigating its terrain. Cinema has the capacity to serve people who experience the agony of suicidal ideation, as well as the friends and family who want to help or feel unsupported in the aftermath. I was heartened to see two excellent films at the NYFF this year which made space to explore suicide and won plaudits for it; Cannes Palme D'Or winner *Anatomy of a Fall* from French director Justine Triet, co-written with her partner Arthur Harari, and *All of Us Strangers*, British director Andrew Haigh's gorgeous film adapted from Taichi Yamada's 1987 novel *Strangers*.

Anatomy of A Fall is exactly that. A journalist arrives at a mountain chalet near Grenoble to interview novelist Sandra Voyter (Sandra Hüller again in another excellent role). Her husband Samuel Maleski (Samuel Theis) is playing music so loudly in the attic that the pair abandon the interview. The disorientation that comes from this moment, of two women trying to converse amidst an onslaught of sound, remains with us throughout the film. Soon after, the couple's son Daniel (Milo Machado Graner) returns from a walk with his guide dog to find his father's dead body below the attic window. What ensues is part history of a marriage gone sour, told in flashback, and part courtroom thriller as Sandra is tried as a potential suspect. A bruise on Sandra's arm suggestive of marital violence, combined with the prosecution's claim that Sandra's novel may foreshadow her ill intent further muddy the waters. Sandra's friend Vincent (Swann Arlaud) acts as her conscience for us as we watch, their conversations providing an insight into Sandra's state of mind.

As investigators try to work out the 'anatomy' of the title – whether Samuel fell by choice or force, we witness the ways a possible suicide can shake a family. We see the havoc a criminal investigation and a slew of memories and past incidents can wreak. In one key flashback Sandra and Samuel have a fight so messy it feels intrusive to watch them hurl insults and become aggressive. It is a moment many couples may recognize in themselves but be loath to admit. The film tackles the feelings that arise when a partner's death casts blame over every past action. Triet allows us to see what the shape of keeping a family stable, while processing trauma, can take. Ultimately, she provides an exquisite look at how the grief of a father's suicide threatens the bond between mother and young son, and shows us that healing can be found.

All of Us Strangers does its work by looking at both the root of suicide and the aftermath of death. English writer-director Andrew Haigh is a master at crafting deeply felt relationships and it's easy to see why this film swept the BAFTA awards. *All of Us Strangers* had me from the first frame. Haigh's landscape is a newly built, largely empty high rise on the outskirts of London. The building stands solitary and cool in its posh urbane modernity and pin-drop silent vistas from expansive windows. The setting echoes the plains of depression; vast, cut-off, melancholic and occasionally beautiful. Two occupants, possibly the building's only two, Andrew Scott as Adam and Paul Mescal as Harry, appear to have picked this place as a refuge from the world, but their connection quickly supersedes the emotional scars they might be nursing.

Both these brilliant Irish actors are better known stateside for their heartthrob quotients – Scott was *Fleabag*'s 'hot priest' and Mescal *Normal People*'s Connell – but *All of Us Strangers* has you wondering that they could ever be anyone else. As Adam and Harry's relationship builds, it is marked by an open sincerity that echoes the film's eighties pop soundtrack – songs which we won't admit make us want to sing and cry. Still, my packed theater was sniffling in unison as elbows rubbed.

As the men reveal themselves to each other and to us, we learn that Adam, who is some years older than Harry, is in the process of writing a screenplay, one that resurfaces his childhood. He repeatedly visits a couple – played by Jamie Bell and Claire Foy, in his childhood home. The early-middle-aged couple appear to be Adam's parents from when he was young and are around his age now. Over several of these encounters, Adam starts treading over the past with the couple, particularly their challenges accepting him as a young gay boy.

These actors are so skilled that we suspend disbelief about what these 'visits' are – time travel, imagination, or the supernatural – and become wholly invested in a person grappling with unresolved pain and the sorrow of all the things he can no longer say to the people he lost. As these visits punctuate Adam and Harry's relationship, we learn more about the quieter Harry who holds his own pain closer. Stray comments give us a glimpse into Harry's loneliness and his own struggle to be accepted by a family who he appears estranged from. Harry is the rock who helps Adam through the grief over his parents, but where the film shines is in revealing the fragility that lingers beneath the younger man. It is an astonishing portrait of depression, lyrically but insistently reminding us that the blackness can be quiet enough to steal a person while we're watching.

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SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

A NEW CHAPTER FOR JASS MANAK

THE STAGE IS SET FOR THE PUNJABI SENSATION TO RECLAIM HIS POSITION AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE INDIAN MUSIC SCENE

By Peony Hirwani

Photographs: **Prateek Thakur**

Stylist: **Harry Dhaliwal**

Hair: **Vasu Bhatia**

JASS MANAK is back, baby!

On December 6th, 2023, the "Prada" hitmaker walked into *Rolling Stone India*'s Mumbai office, signaling an end to his break from the music scene. "It feels so good to be here," the 24-year-old said. "I've been away from the music industry for a while, and I feel incredible to be back." Jass wore a noticeable glow, similar to someone returning from a relaxing vacation in the Maldives, radiating eagerness and determination for what lies ahead in his musical journey.

Jass—full name Jaspreet Singh Manak—embarked on his professional music journey in 2018. He was 19 years old. Recalling the early days, the singer expressed gratitude for the unwavering support of his friends back in his hometown of Bhakhirana, Punjab. The turning point occurred when "one fine day, my gang randomly took me to a music studio, where we ended up recording a song," Jass shared. Initially, singing and recording were mere hobbies, but eventually, "we started taking it seriously". "That's when we recorded a song called 'Prada'," Jass told *Rolling Stone India*. Little

did he anticipate that this track would evolve into a sensational hit, accumulating over 51 million plays on Spotify and amassing a staggering 841 million views on YouTube.

Jass Manak remained unstoppable, consistently writing, recording, and releasing new music until the year 2022. It was at this point, and after the release of his hit track "Lehanga," that he made the conscious decision to take a break from his musical pursuits. Reflecting on his choice, the "No Competition" singer explained, "When you keep doing something over and over again, there comes a point when you need a break." Jass recognized that external factors, including forced "brand collaborations and the intense pressure to release new music" was impacting the quality of his artistic expression. He felt a diminishing passion in his music-making process, signaling the need for a break to rekindle the creative fire that had been lost. When asked what he ended up doing on the long break, Jass candidly shared, "Honestly, nothing at all. I kept myself free from work, traveled to London, ate good food, and had fun."

During his "creative break," Jass Manak not only indulged in leisure but also completely set himself free. The break allowed him to step back and reassess his life and the impact he wants to make. As the break unfolded, he found himself drawn to new sounds and ideas, subconsciously enriching his creative palette. Now, as he makes his return to the music scene, Jass brings with him not just the memories of a relaxing interval but a renewed sense of purpose and desire to explore uncharted territories.

In the course of the interview, Jass Manak disclosed intriguing details about his music-making process, underscoring his solitary and organic approach. "I do it all alone," he revealed with a certain pride. He described initiating the creative journey by seeking out a "peaceful" environment, a place where the chaos of the world can be momentarily silenced. There, he begins by immersing himself in the ethos of a random beat, letting the music dictate the narrative. It's a method that hinges on the symbiotic relationship between the melody and his lyricism, showcasing a distinctive fusion of introspection and spontaneous inspiration. This process not only illustrates the singer's creative process but also adds a layer of authenticity to his talent.

Jass, with a newfound enthusiasm, also shared his plans for the upcoming year. "I'm going to release a lot of new songs this year," he affirmed with a spark of anticipation in his eyes. Teasing a shift in his musical vibe, he hinted at a transformation in his sound that promises to captivate audiences in fresh and unexpected ways. While on the topic of new music, the Punjabi singer disclosed details of his new partnership with American rapper Nas and Peter Bittenbender's Mass Appeal India for the next phase of his career.

In layman's terms, this strategic partnership promises to be a nice blend of creative vision and business acumen. For anyone who's familiar with the rich history of Mass Appeal—renowned for its impactful contributions to the music industry—the partnership holds the promise of steering Jass's upcoming releases to new heights.

After concluding the interview, Jass Manak stayed in The Studio by *Rolling Stone India*, treating me to an exclusive preview of one of his unreleased tracks. I found it particularly refreshing to observe the singer's openness to criticism, as he actively sought professional opinion on his music. This willingness to receive feedback showcases a genuine commitment to growth and an authentic connection with his audience, demonstrating Jass's commitment to delivering meaningful and evolving musical experiences.

As someone privileged to have heard both Jass Manak's old as well as new and upcoming music, the announcement of his return is nothing short of a treat. The blend of fresh sounds, combined with the artist's evolved perspective, creates an aura of intrigue and promise. In my view, fans can expect a new resurgence.

As Jass's story continues, the stage is set for the Punjabi sensation to reclaim his position at the forefront of the Indian music scene. The wait is finally over, and Jass Manak's new music is about to enchant us all.

10 Best K-Dramas of 2023

Features a set of big hits and favorites: 'Glory Part 2,' 'My Demon,' 'Twinkling Watermelon,' 'Moving,' and more

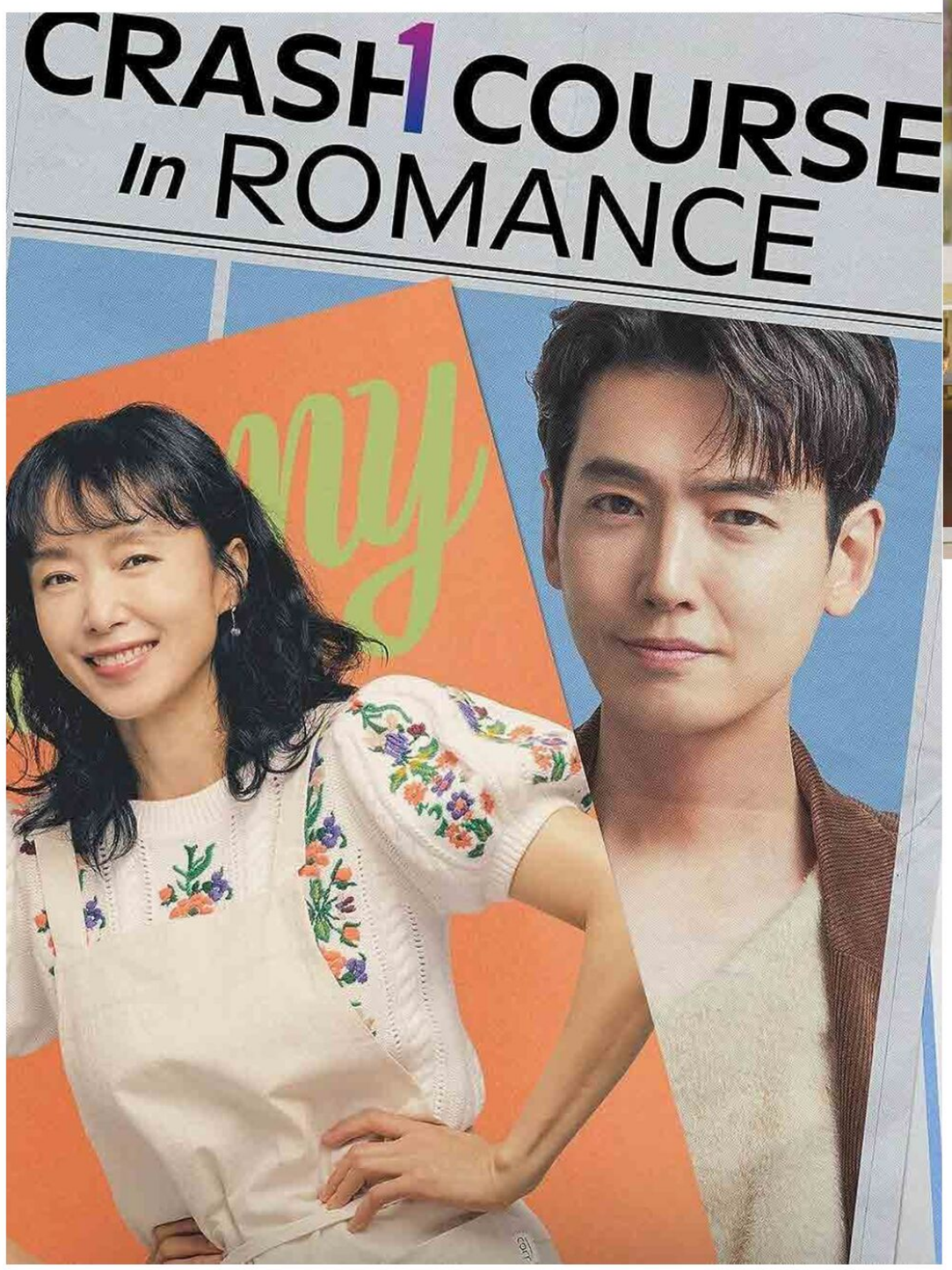
By DEBASHREE DUTTA

IN EVERY WAY that a story may be addictive, I have found them to be so. Here are my top 10 picks for the best K-dramas of 2023.

CRASH COURSE IN ROMANCE

The show shot to fame and currently ranks as one of the highest-rated dramas on Korean cable television ever. As things play out, Choi Chi-yeol (Jung Kyung-ho), an elite math specialist whose courses are a craze among students, and Nam Haeng-seon (Jeon Do-yeon), an ex-national handball player running a side dish shop and whose daughter gets caught up in the tough college application processes, grow close.

I love how it raises awareness of the demanding curriculum in Korea. It attacks its unjustifiable coercion. But I love more how it's also an endearing love story, giving a suitable counterpoint to its seriousness.



In how the romance grows between Haeng-seon and Chi-yeol across bittersweet and comic moments in their lives, Jeon Do-Yeon and Jung Kyung-Ho are amazing, affording legitimacy to *Crash Course in Romance*. It is purely an immersive and cohesive K-drama worth your time.

SEE YOU IN MY 19TH LIFE

Moon Seo-ha (Ahn Bo-hyun) is an illustrious family scion victim of trauma over a car crash. He is "the man" for Shin Hye-sun's Ban Ji-eum and the executive director of the strategic planning team of the MI Hotel. Joining them, Ji-eum carries with her memory of her past lives and a millennium of reincarnations. In its fantasy arc, as the story unfolds, she must rekindle her romance with Seo-ha through the present—her 19th life.

It's an enlightening and pleasant one, as the drama makes an absence from the norm. It oozes poignancy, laced with periods of anguish. The way Shin Hye-sun navigates sentiments and emotes on screen is just like she always is—a consummate actor.

Elaborating on his interpretive fluidities, Ahn Bo-hyun deftly carries the burden of Seo-ha's losses, despair, and misfortunes. His innate eloquence conveys to us his frailties and anxieties, together with the disability he experienced in the tragedy.

The drama combines fantasy with relatable events in our lives. That builds the ethos of the story, making it one of the finest this year offers.

THE WORST OF EVIL

In the 1990s, Gangnam, *The Worst of Evil*, lays out a clandestine mission whereby cop detective Park Jun-mo (Ji Chang-wook) infiltrates crime syndicate kingpin Jung Gi-chul's (Wi Ha-joon) gang, running an illicit narcotics trade between Korea, China, and Japan.

Brisk action, sudden shocks, and a tie between the two men at the center form a wild-tense scenario, for the bond is unfounded and friendship is doomed if truth be told.

The Worst of Evil is a unique take on the crime-action genre and shows off Ji Chang-wook's ability to play a more twisted part in his first-ever R-rated series. He paints Jun-mo vividly, given how well he nails his inner plight, anxiety, and desperation.

Wi Ha-joon holds a sway over dominance. He is gorgeous and oozes immorality—a ravenous foe who bursts onto the screen. However, in certain respects, his genuineness in love and trust in company expose his frailties.

The hectic pace manifests an unfamiliar, grisly crime drama dense with danger and savagery. The opus is of complexity and complex feelings—love, brotherhood, deceit, sacrifice, sorrow, and all the in-between seamlessly interwoven into a mind-bender.

LOVE TO HATE YOU

In a patriarchal society, attorney Yeo Mi-ran (Kim Ok-vin), who hates losing to men, uses her martial arts background to impose retribution in her fight for fairness. Conversely, Teo Yoo's Nam Kang-ho, a mega-star actor, has a harsh opinion about women. Well, up until they're made to go on dates.

Love to Hate You matures into a remarkably perceptive piece. It unveils the core reality of Korean glam culture, where artists often maintain a grin despite personal misery. It does a great job of examining the idea that it's okay to be a badass and not care what others think of you because you're a woman.

One of the best exchanges is between Mi-ran and Kang-ho, in which the latter complains to her about being a rescuer and having to pay the price. The dialogue is an excellent reminder of how society generally views women and their roles. That Mi-ran's history and her sexual life trigger a debate also bears witness to that, upholding cultural norms in a variety of domains, most notably its treatment of women. Still, there's no denying that Kang-ho is a gentleman who cherishes Mi-ran. That sets a precedent.

COURTESY OF NETFLIX; DISNEY HOTSTAR; DISNEY+; TVN; TVING; SBS; JTBC; VIU

REVENANT

Gu San-yeong (Kim Tae-ri), a lawyer, gets taken over by a demonic entity and gets stuck in unexplainable killings upon receiving her late father's belongings. There's also a folklore professor here, Yeom Hae-sang (Oh Jung-se), who sees ghosts, and they pair up to unearth the truth underlying the mystery.

That describes it as a mystery horror thriller. Indeed, it is, but it's truly original with its labyrinths of unknowns that grab you while keeping you from finding the answers too soon.

The acting is top-notch, and the portrayal of the proceedings is spotless. Though not very "scary," its image of a society burdened by constraints, challenges, and hardships daunts.

THE GOOD BAD MOTHER

Jin Young-soon (Ra Mi-ran) and her prosecutor son Choi Kang-ho (Lee Do-hyun) stand out in *The Good Bad Mother*, a significant victory in the family comedy-drama category. They begin reviving their relationship after an awful accident, leaving Kang-ho memoryless and childlike.

This is a thoughtful, lighthearted, and emotionally charged tale. Though I still think Ra Mi-ran is incredible, Lee has my vote. He portrays the corrupt adult mind and the innocent kid mind, eliciting dynamism in each.

The story eloquently illustrates the intricate nature of life. It became one of the highest-rated shows in Korean cable television history, and I can see why—I thoroughly enjoyed it.

MY DEMON

The leads are a feast for the eyes as Song Kang and Kim Yoo-jung weave a breath of fresh-air romance in a scenario where their union seems predestined.

Jung Gu-won (Song), a formidable demon who has spent ages striking lethal bargains with humans, suddenly loses his powers to Do Do-hee (Kim) and signs a contract marriage with her, the entitled heiress of a conglomerate. The episode continues with fleeting moments of romance that soon trigger damnation.

Do-hee's life is at stake, as is Gu-won's, who puts himself on the line to keep her safe from a web of familial scheming aimed at usurping power. Dramatic disclosures exist, with some exposed and more to come, particularly with Do-hee's connection to Gu-won's history.

I'm keen on the true tale of Gu-won's sleep visions and his future, which will, in the end, dictate the fate of his and Do-hee's marriage.

Through its perfect blend of surrealism and intrigue, *My Demon* is a perfect complement to romantic and fantasy K-dramas.

GLORY PART 2

Glory Part 2 is a gratifying wrap-up to an already engrossing potboiler as Moon Dong-eun (Song Hye-kyo) eventually gets her due.

Moon, an elementary school homeroom teacher, endured chronic physical assault and bullying from Park Yeon-jin (Im Ji-yeon) and her high school clique. Dropping out as a result, she resurfaced years later with a carefully crafted revenge plan. The first half of the story has Moon pushing things to the brink of justice; the sequel tells how she accomplishes so.

A class unto itself—the screenplay is well-knit, and the actors' performances are on fire. I cherish its underpinnings of how a woman's wrath can occasionally be worse than one may imagine and how love can make up for losses. It also evokes Moon and Joo Yeo-jeong's (Lee Do-hyun) process from futility to healing via care and love. Best of all, beauty is skin deep. Moon's admission of her scars—first to Joo and then in public—shows she is over her insecurity and that, even after being burned, she is beautiful in how she is.

Revenge K-drama at its finest; this take is far more profound and stimulating. The precisely timed tension, the build-up, and the painstaking execution yield inadequate resolution. Song Hye-Kyo's best thus far.

TWINKLING WATERMELON

Twinkling Watermelon is an ode to life and living that draws on the bizarre experiences of Ha Eun-gyeol (Ryeo Un), a high schooler whose parents are hard of hearing.

Inexplicably, he flies back in time to 1995 and finds his father, Ha Yi-chan (Choi Hyun-wook), aged eighteen and in mint condition. Yi-chan is baffled when Eun-gyeol identifies him as his father. A dazed Eun-gyeol seeks an answer. Along the way, he joins Yi-chan's band, and so begins an epic tale of camaraderie, comedy, romance, and revelations.

Its unpredictability, riddled with subtleties and nuanced situations centered around the protagonists and their pasts, is what makes it so stunning—as creative as how music works as a unifying and cathartic ingredient. You are missing something if you haven't watched this gem.

MOVING

The groundbreaking web series version of Kang Full's webtoon, *Moving*, has a succession of Korean superheroes starring some of the country's best-known actors—Ryu Seung-ryong, Zo In-sung, and Han Hyo-joo—as superhero parents doing everything in their power to protect their teenage superhero kids from villains.

The staging is sublime, the cinematic details are unerring, the action is enticing while fraught with feelings, and the scope is huge. I say: *Moving* sets a precedent for stellar, exquisitely rendered webtoon adaptations. It can be a gauge for the evolution of K-content throughout time.

Wait, that's not it. The superheroes in *Moving* are the true thrill, amid its unparalleled computer graphics. I have to admit that I couldn't keep my eyes off of Zo In-sung. He has Kim Doo-sik, codenamed Moon-san, a debonaire, free-swinging, flying black ops agent for the National Intelligence Service (NIS). He is also the husband

of Lee Mi-hyun (Han Hyo-joo), an ex-NIS agent with extraordinary senses.

Their romance is arresting, the chemistry is terrific, and Zo wows with every inch of his personality. ®

Reviews

Music

KALI UCHIS BLOOMS BRIGHTER

The silky-voiced singer finds new inspiration on her second Spanish-language album

By JULYSSA LOPEZ

Kali Uchis
Orquídeas
GEFFEN

Few ARTISTS can set a scene like Kali Uchis. Each of her albums has proven that she's a master of mood boards and a queen of aesthetics: Her 2018 debut album, *Isolation*, was a lush world of retro R&B best enjoyed on a heart-shaped couch; 2023's *Red Moon in Venus* included cosmic, shape-shifting pop songs to be drunk up during a lunar eclipse. Across each project, she's stitched disparate sonic textures together like fabric swatches and placed her voice front and center — allowing it to gently guide her listeners to whatever new world she was building.

In true Kali fashion, her new album, *Orquídeas,* started with a specific vision: "This album is inspired by the timeless, eerie, mystic, striking, →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Débora Islas

KALI UCHIS

graceful, and sensual allure of the orchid," she said in a press release that reads more like poetry. The orchid, it turns out, is the national flower of Colombia, where Uchis spent a lot of time as a kid. "I always felt distinctly intrigued and magnetized by the flower." The goal across the record, Uchis continued, is to harness that imagery to "re-define the way we look at Latinas in music."

Quickly on *Orquídeas*, it becomes clear Uchis has a few things in mind: First of all, she wants the world to know there's no box or category to limit Latinas sonically. She bounces from icy R&B to bright merengue to liquefied dream pop. Second, the album balances a careful mix of power and vulnerability, one that adds complexity and nuance to notions of Latinas in music that often involve stereotypes as lusty sirens or spicy firebrands.

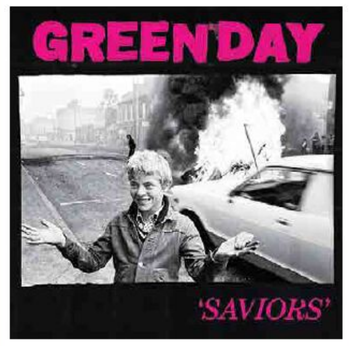
Take, for example, "Igual Que un Ángel," a synth-pop ode to female autonomy. "She just wants peace.... She never forgets what's real," she sings in Spanish. When it's less expected, Mexican star Peso Pluma pops onto the track, emphasizing Uchis' message of tenacity. "Perdiste" is a glowing ballad that tenderly reminds an ex-lover of the woman he's lost, while "Te Mata" is a reclamation of independence after a toxic relationship, beautifully crafted into a modern-day bolero. It's one of the most stunning vocal performances by Uchis, who showed her knack for re-creating old-school classics when she interpreted La Lupe's burning "Què Te Pedí" on her first Spanish-language album, 2020's *Sin Miedo (del Amor y Otros Demonios)*.

But *Orquídeas* is also loaded with sexual agency and bad-bitch energy. "Labios Mordidos," the album's centerpiece, is an empowerment anthem that enlists her fellow Colombian Karol G for a glossed-out *perreo* party. On the discoed-out "No Hay Ley Parte 2," she exchanges come-hither lyrics with Rauw Alejandro, then cranks up the energy on "Muñekita" for a splash of dembow, featuring Dominican luminary El Alfa and City Girls rapper JT.

Across the album, Uchis is bolder and more forthright than on past releases. So often, she's played the languid cool girl, but she breaks out of her shell again and again this time out. She dives deeper into new sounds, and she flourishes the entire way. ®

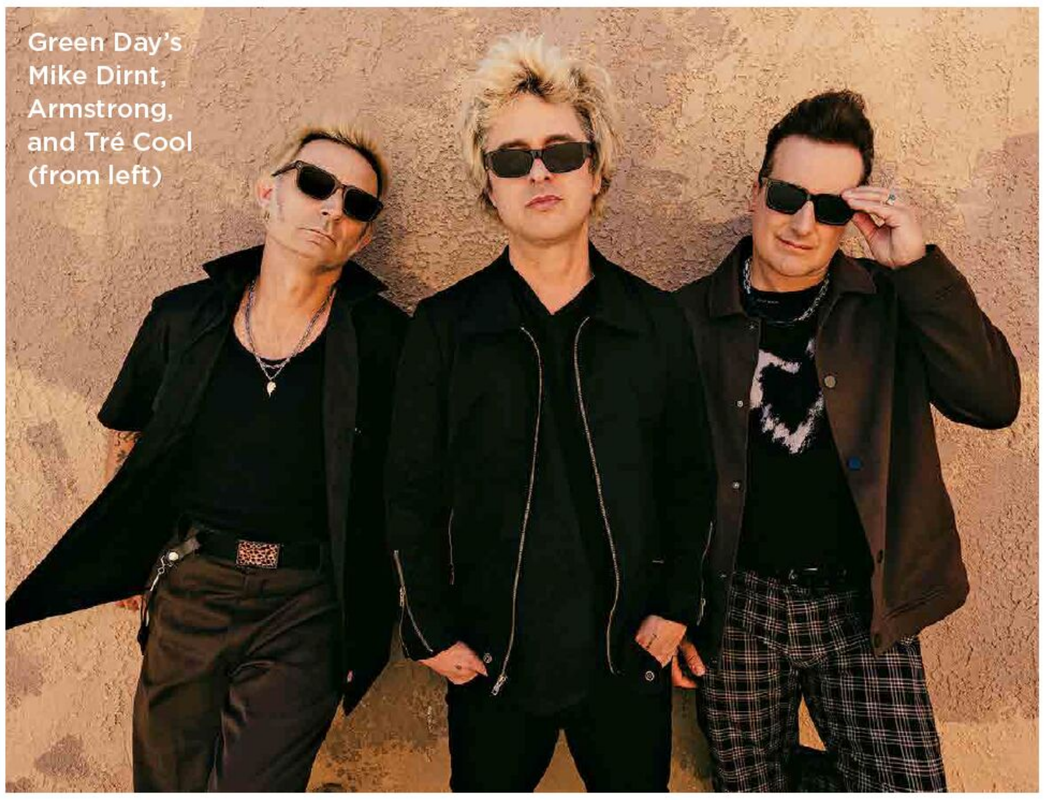
GREEN DAY'S GROWN-UP PUNK

The band's 14th album has huge songs and snotty satire for a world on fire By KORY GROW



Green Day
'Saviors'
Reprise

More than three decades ago, Green Day's Billie Joe Armstrong was sarcastically singing "Welcome to Paradise." Now at age 51, he's staidly singing, "Welcome to my problems," on "Dilemma," a plaintive, swinging rocker on Green Day's 14th LP, *'Saviors,'* which owes a debt to Fifties rock and the Ramones. "I was sober, now I'm drunk again," he wails in the chorus. "I'm in trouble and in love again/I don't want to be a dead man walking." It's one of the album's best songs, and as another pop-punk trio once put it, well, I guess this is growing up.


Green Day's Mike Dirnt, Armstrong, and Tré Cool (from left)

After all, "aging punk band" might be the most oxymoronic phrase in music. But Green Day, much like combat rockers the Clash, long ago figured out the path to mainstream salvation was leaning away from punk and into their big-box influences while satirizing the world at large. That approach made the Bay Area trio punk's biggest-ever band, and it's Armstrong's alternating earnestness and sarcasm, combined with some typically hummable tunes, that makes *'Saviors'* something of a return to form for Green Day, who drifted a little too far into pop territory on 2020's *Father of All Motherfuckers*.

Since merry melodies have always been their forte, "1981" is particularly memorable with its chorus — "She's gonna bang her head like 1981" — even if Armstrong's lyrics about slam-dancing in acid rain read, like, totally gnarly. (Armstrong has always had a knack for fluffing up puerile lyrics with smart chord changes.) "Coma City" and "Corvette Summer" are both big rock songs for the sake of big rock.

Armstrong's lyrics fall into three categories: songs about growing up ("Dilemma," the acoustic dad-rock ditty "Father to a Son"), silly songs about nothing ("One Eyed Bastard" is a *Sopranos*-esque goombah rocker that has refrains of "Bada-bing, bada-bing"), and, of course, heaps of social commentary. Some of it is amusing — the conservative satire "The American Dream Is Killing Me," the proud bisexuality of "Bobby Sox," a dig at "assholes in space" bankrupting the planet on "Coma City." But Armstrong misses his target on "Living in the '20s" when he sounds a little too blithe singing about the deadly 2021 King Soopers mass shooting in Colorado.

Still, Green Day have always been less about actual activism and more about laughing while the world around them burns. That attitude has made them survivors in the hazardous profession of punk rock, and they know it. "Everybody's famous, stupid, and contagious," they sing, sending up Nirvana on album closer "Fancy Sauce," "as we all die young someday." But what's impressive about *'Saviors'* is how they've gotten (mostly) better with age. ®

FROM TOP: ALICE BAXLEY; MADISON HURLEY

BREAKING

Willi Carlisle's Openhearted Folk

WILLI CARLISLE has been barnstorming the country the past few years with his righteous, roving accordion-folk tales about van life, borderlands cattle ranching, and cheap cocaine. But the Illinois/Kansas-raised singer-songwriter truly levels up on *Critterland,* his latest album, recorded with roots legend Darrell Scott. These richly rendered songs mix harrowing heartland reportage on sobriety, suicide, and Ozark drug rings with openhearted tales of grief, fatherhood, and packing bowls in a Tennessee Bojangles. The result is a beautiful folk document of American reckoning and redemption. JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

BECOMING KIM OK-VIN

Her filmography includes big wins like Park Chan-wook's 'Thirst,' and Jung Byung-gil's 'The Villainess.' They reiterate what Kim's acting encapsulates—freewheeling at times, unpredictable at others, yet consistently controlled

By **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

COURTESY OF NETFLIX; HANCINEMA

KIM OK-VIN is an actor you need to know; her on-screen presence exudes infectious energy, she is commanding and steadfast, and her career keeps going great guns.

If many actors prioritize being seen the way the audience wants to see them, the gutsy ones go for the anomalies—roles regardless of whether a character is complex, crazy, likable, or not. That's my impression of Kim Ok-vin or Kim Ok-bin, the 37-year-old Korean actress who commits herself to challenging portrayals, carving out something fine invariably. Kim may embody the wrath, audacity, brazenness, and unspoken desires of characters while remaining fierce and fascinating, adeptly navigating through dramatic personality shifts in her works.

The ghoulish movie *Voice*—the fourth entry in the *Whispering Corridors* film series—was her first. It marked the feature film debuts of director Choi Ik-hwan and three actresses, including Kim. During its 2006 San Francisco Korean American Film Festival screening, Kim stole the show with her turn in the film, earning nods for Best New Actress at the Baeksang Arts Awards and the Blue Dragon Film Awards. She lacked an acting background to aid her, so it was off to an impressive start, and the rest is history.

Her physical and mental fortitude are inherent, given that she is an avid fitness enthusiast who trained for a while in boxing, Muay Thai, and other forms of martial arts. If not, what could've driven a young, novice actor to sign for the role of the "poor girl" in the musical comedy film *Dasepo Naughty Girls* (2006)? She portrayed a breadwinner for her family, living off prostitution. Thus, she had to have the courage to pull off the bold part, which she did, and she did it with proven poise.

Her succeeding roles entailed experimenting, testing, and pushing limits. Playing traits out of her comfort zone, Kim has dared to explore new ground and succeeded. From a starring role in the drama *Hello, God* (2006) as a swindler to being an aspiring pop star in *Over the Rainbow* (2006), which called for her to perform breakdance and sing, to a Joseon-era kisaeng in her next film, *The Accidental Gangster and the Mistaken Courtesan* (2008), a significant portrayal that she described as difficult, citing Korean media.

My admiration for Kim swelled tenfold once I saw *Thirst*, filmmaker Park Chan-wook's gem of abject terror. After a botched medical experiment turns Sang-hyun (Song Kang-ho), a Catholic priest, into a vampire, he discovers his obsession with Tae-ju (Kim), his dear friend's wife. *Thirst* is surprising, erotic, and vicious. Don't interpret it as another vampire flick if you haven't seen it. And see *Thirst* if you haven't seen any of Kim's other works. You will love seeing someone veering from subservient to

HER PHYSICAL AND MENTAL FORTITUDE ARE INHERENT, GIVEN THAT SHE IS AN AVID FITNESS ENTHUSIAST WHO TRAINED FOR A WHILE IN DIFFERENT FORMS OF MARTIAL ARTS.

dominant with ease. She's hot; her displays of lust and passion are terrific, as is her uncanny capacity to kill without pause to feed her killer instincts.

Besides the film's many wins, Kim was nominated at the Blue Dragon, Green Globe, and Baeksang Arts Awards at the time, and she co-won the Best Actor award at the 42nd Sitges Film Festival, alongside Elena Anaya for *Hierro*.

Kim Ok-vin's oeuvre implies her penchant for crafting characters that draw you into their worlds. Among the finest of these vibrant, quirky characters are Cha Tae-Kyeong, a North Korean sniper from the 2011 war film *The Frontline*; Han Dong-hwa, a pink-haired character from the 2012 heist film *Over My Dead Body*; Young-eun, a researcher from the 2013 sci-fi thriller *11 A.M.*; Princess So-hee/Moo-young, who assumes the identity of a male warrior in the 2013 period epic TV drama *The Blade and Petal*; Kang Yoo-na, an ace pickpocket from the 2014 romantic comedy crime drama *Steal Heart*; and Gong Soo-kyung, a reporter from the 2015 courtroom drama film, *Minority Opinion*.

Kim Ok-vin has an unreserved urge to flex herself in an action account, I feel. In her titular act as *The Villainess* (2017), directed by Jung Byung-gil, she almost detonated on screen, reclaiming her charisma and competence. The film opened at the 70th Cannes Film Festival and was given a long-standing ovation.

It's filled to the brim with obscenely thrilling and baffling ingredients directed at an erratic and merciless act of payback by Sook-hee (Kim), acting as a professional executioner, who initiates a violent and vengeful mission for her personal freedom and traumatic past. As soon as she walks into a hallway right off the bat, she executes many people, giving us a preview of what's ahead. With Sook-ee, it seems Kim made a mark for herself in the genre of high-octane action Korean films.

More projects thereafter: A military thriller action film *The Discloser* (2018); the fantasy thriller drama *Children of a Lesser God* (2018); the period fantasy drama *Arthdal Chronicles* (2020); and of course, the stupendous romantic comedy *Love to Hate You* (2023), securing a place in our list of the 10 best K-dramas of 2023—are other notable titles in her set that reiterate what Kim Ok-vin's acting encapsulates. It's freewheeling at times, unpredictable at others, yet consistently controlled.

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MUST-WATCH MOVIES OF GONG YOO

Gong's success story derives from how he eschews his accomplishments while still seeking to outperform his prior efforts

By **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

I'VE GROWN more apprehensive. I have these ambitions that I don't want to lose sight of. I think might become self-critical about the things I try to change about myself as I grow older and more knowledgeable, more so than before."—Gong Yoo on his acting career

I go with three words from the quote, "apprehensive," "ambition," and "self-critical," to corroborate what I wrote about him in my Actor You Need to Know series—that Gong is "the artist" of marked traits—and the above attributes belong to those that mark him as the elite Korean actor that he is. I feel Gong Yoo's success story derives from how he eschews his accomplishments while still seeking to outperform his prior efforts—some very notable ones; his must-watch movies are enclosed below.

Finding Mr. Destiny (*2010*) – *Chang You-jeong*

Gong is awe-inspiring in tapping into emotions; maybe he infuses something distinctive of himself into each of his portrayals to shore up his artistic prowess. His equation with Im Soo-jung evolved into a simpatico romance comedy in *Finding Mr. Destiny*. Gong's attractiveness and subtle playing breathed life into his character, Han Gi-joon. Gi-joon operates a firm specializing in locating first loves. In pursuit of a long-lost sweetheart, Ji-woo (Im) calls for a hand. Gi-joon comes to assist; he is a touch too fanatical about work and is fiercely fastidious, but that starts to wane when he realizes he is falling for Ji-woo.

Silenced (*2011*) – *Hwang Dong-hyuk*

Silenced is a dramatization of Gong Ji-young's novel The Crucible, an unnerving instance of harrowing occurrences at Gwangju Inhwa School for the Deaf in the early 2000s, where staff members frequently molested children with hearing impairments for five years. Gong plays Kang In-ho in the movie, a recently brought-in art teacher who pledges to uphold children's rights and uncover sexual crime at the school. The film allegedly prompted lawmakers to enact measures defending the rights of the vulnerable.

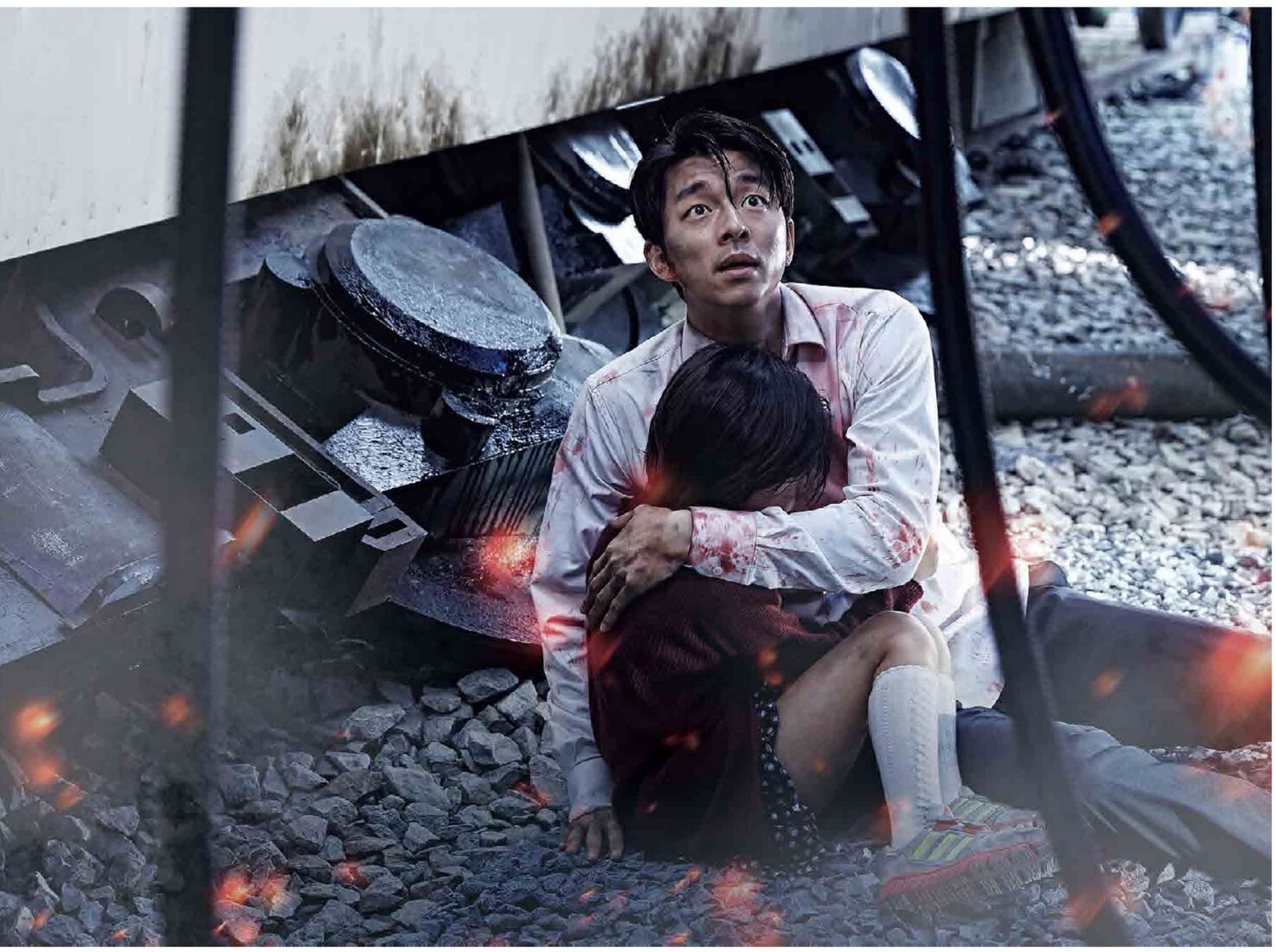
COURTESY OF IMDB

The Suspect (*2013*) – *Won Shin-yun*

With his ingenious approach across multiple genres, Gong has raised the benchmark for singularity through his extensive work. In the gripping spy film, *The Suspect*, Gong starred as Ji Dong-cheol, once a high-profile North Korean spy who defected and set off to find out the homicide of his family upon being unjustly accused of murdering the chairman of a major enterprise. Dong-cheol flees once more while attempting to gather the sensitive documents that his deceased employer had asked him to locate, while the South Korean intelligence service launches a manhunt for him.

A Man and a Woman (*2016*) – *Lee Yoon-ki*

In this intense romance, Gong as Ki-hong, who meets Sang-min (Jeon Do-yeon) in Finland, succinctly communicates the hopelessness of a married man profoundly drawn to a married woman. They initiate an illicit affair that, at some point, calls into question morality and brings suffering. The picture is highly powerful in how it evokes the mental upheaval, the sense of breaching families yet being hesitant to give up on each other, and the passion they may have been pining for. The lack you may sense but are oblivious to until somebody eliminates it is one of the highlights here. And Gong reinstates that in perfect unison with the consummate Jeon, emoting brilliantly.



Train to Busan (*2016*) – *Yeon Sang-ho*

My favorite [Korean] zombie movie to date is *Train to Busan*. It has solid characters and socioeconomic references, juxtaposed with the expertly staged chaos on the eponymous train. It has parallels to concerns like corporatism, materialism, parenting, and relationships, while also being the enticing survival tale that it is. We see a self-serving, materialistic workaholic Seok-woo (Gong) pushing all boundaries—dropping duty calls for his child upon realizing (amid the mayhem) that her life is worth more than his job or that being alive matters most. *Train to Busan* is insightful, a deftly made human story underlying the grotesqueness of a zombie apocalypse.

The Age of Shadows (*2016*) – *Kim Jee-woon*

Gong is distinguished for the richness of the characters he creates—driving a story and interacting with viewers. *The Age of Shadows* is a classic example and an action thriller that follows Korean resistance members trafficking explosives to blow up Japanese military-controlled sites. Here, Gong nails the role of Kim Woo-jin, a crucial member whose antique shop functions as an alias for the operation.

Kim Ji-young: Born 1982 (*2019*) – *Cho Nam-ju*

Gong and co-star Jung Yu-mi played a married couple to widespread acclaim in this film based on Cho Nam-Joo's best-selling same-named novel; it deals with the daily discrimination the protagonist faces, experiencing depression from becoming a stay-at-home mom.

We see an embodiment of the daily hurdles endured by Korean women through Jung's Ji-young, 30, a homemaker. She abruptly experiences depression, begins to act erratically, and seems to be possessed by her deceased grandmother and mother. At this Jung Dae-hyun (Gong), her husband, alarmed and anxious, resorts to mental health care for her cure.

Seo Bok (*2021*) – *Lee Yong-ju*

Seo Bok is only one of the many excellent productions that contributed to Gong's career throughout the years. In the Korean science fiction action film, Min Gi-heon (Gong) is a former intelligence agency operative, and Seo Bok (Park Bo-gum) is a prototype human clone created by stem cell replication and genetic manipulation—the key to perpetual life. The two get entangled in perilous situations as several parties try to seize Seo Bok, while they also form a special affinity with each other.

Chaka Khan

The 'Queen of Funk' on addiction, her Kanye beef, and her musical legacy

One of the titles you considered for your memoir years ago was *To Hell and Back in a Limousine*. What, for you, was the "hell" part?
Riding on a bus, pissing in a little bathroom, waking up in the morning, and you're five hours from your hotel where you can take a proper bath or shower and go to bed like a normal human being. And then you got a gig that night. That's friggin' insane. It was just insanity. It's like being a truck driver and a performer. It's lonely as all get-out.

Chaka Khan was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in November.

You've talked about winding down your touring career. I've had artists like Keith Richards tell me they want to die onstage — clearly that's not you.
Some people, that's all they have, you know? I got this rich-ass life. I've got great-grandchildren I want to get to know better. So I will not do another tour. I'll do dates, but it won't look like a tour. They'll be far enough apart that I can have time to sleep in between.

Will you ever retire from performing altogether?
Well, I might do that three or four times, like other bitches do [*laughs*].

A story people might not know is that Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love" was originally a duet with you — and the label erased your vocals for apparently racist reasons. How do you see that incident?
On so many levels, it was a bad call. I did go through a period because of "Addicted to Love" where I was very hurt. And I marveled at how something so pure and simple and beautiful could be just wiped off the face of the Earth because of money.

How much do you think about legacy, about your music being heard when you're gone someday?
I don't really care. I would hope that some of my shit has some longevity, but if it doesn't, that'll be because hopefully somebody better has come along. I just hope that the art form doesn't get so screwed up with stupid shit — kids today think that every instrument can be played on a keyboard. Instruments have to be introduced once again to these kids.

Did you ever have any mixed feelings about Whitney Houston covering "I'm Every Woman"?
Absolutely not. Because she did a stellar fucking job. I was flabbergasted! I said, "What, did you use my backing vocals on that?" She said, "Nah," and I said, "I'm gonna check it out!" We were very good friends. I miss her as much as I miss Prince. She was such an amazing human. Funny as hell and smart.

To clarify something, the reason you were annoyed with Kanye West about "Through the Wire" is that he asked to use your sampled voice, but didn't make it clear that it'd be sped up, right?
Yeah. And you know, that was my fault, too, for feeling salty about that in any way. Because if I understood the rap game more completely, like I do now, then that wouldn't have been a big deal to me.

So it doesn't bother you anymore?
No, I'm done. Please. I'm not hanging on to any silly grudges.

You once said that given your substance use, you don't know how you didn't become a casualty like so many other musicians. Have you gained any more insight as to how you made it?
No, it's a mystery. I could have easily been a casualty where I was at a couple of times in my life. You know, just by the grace of God.

What would a young Chaka Khan say to you?
She'd say, "Really?" I never, ever once thought that I'd be as well-known as I am today. Because that happened totally without my having to do anything with it, [besides] just my songs. I didn't have great people presenting me in a big way to the world. I am still amazed at how loved I am in this industry. BRIAN HIATT

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**